

Building a brand is all about the actions you take, BT's chief marketing officer Suzi Williams tells George Stenitzer. She explains the role of moves into fibre, the Olympics and sport

BT strategically transforms business and brand, balancing legacy with bold new inventive spirit



Suzi Williams: All the elements of a brilliant brand were already dormant in BT

“All the elements of a brilliant brand were already dormant in BT. What impressed me most, then and now, is the integrity and commitment of BT people, and the quiet excellence found in so many corners of the organisation. BT has always been a purposeful and inventive company — I just had to pull these elements together into a brand vision and framework to build on what was there.”

A series of strategic moves helped reset customers' perceptions of the BT brand. Over the past decade, BT has rolled out a new fibre broadband network, sponsored the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, entered TV and announced plans to add mobile services by acquiring EE.

“This combination of headline-grabbing moves with a tighter focus on brand management contributed to the growth of the BT brand,” she says.

Building a brand is all about the actions you take, Williams emphasises. “I expect smart customers to judge us on what we do more than what we say. Bold moves like fibre, the Olympics and BT Sport are the things that show real intent and purpose, and get people to re-evaluate the business.”

More than a logo

Williams focuses persistently on brand building. She's helped BT learn that the brand is much more than a logo — it's a way to touch people. She led work to define what the BT brand stands for, flesh out its brand personality, and set a consistent tone of voice.

“We work to incorporate a bold and inventive spirit into the brand — without compromising the core equity of trust. With an established brand like BT, that's always the challenge — creating new and positive momentum while keeping the good bits that work,” Williams says.

“We bring BT's purpose to life for customers through the idea of creating possibilities for people to connect, to work smarter and to get more out of life. That thinking guides everything we do and encourages us to be laser-focused on getting the right benefit to customers at the right price.”

As its brand evolves, BT keenly understands that customers want simplicity, not complexity. Customers are looking for services that are easy to use, a bill that's easy to understand, and marketing offers that combine multiple services into one convenient package.

Strategic and brand initiatives have doubled the value of the BT brand to \$16.2 billion since 2009, according to Brand Finance. It's a dramatic growth in brand value, and makes BT the third most valuable brand in the UK and the eighth most valuable telecoms brand in the world.

In building the BT brand, Williams can tap a deep well of branding and marketing experience. She

How do you breathe new life into the marketing of the world's oldest telecoms company, founded in 1846?

As the group marketing and brand director at BT, Suzi Williams tackles that challenge every day. She's worked nearly a decade to rejuvenate the brand as BT strategically transforms its business.

With deep roots as an established telecoms brand, BT is growing by adding branches to its core business. As BT's business transforms, Williams is reshaping the BT brand in tandem.

On joining BT in 2006, Williams found that “BT had spent years hiding its light under a bushel. Back then we were very much a company and not a brand,” she says.

Marketing insights from BT

BT offers these actionable insights on branding:

- While strategy and data are essential, instinct, insight and zeitgeist are important too.
- Hire people and agencies that push you and inspire you.
- Understand that the brand is much more than a logo — it's a way to touch people.
- Be clear about what the brand stands for.
- Build a brand through the actions you take, not just the words you say.
- Create show-stopping moments for the brand.
- Manage tone of voice, both to make customers happy and save money.
- Measure brand value and actively manage it, top down and bottom up.

started her career at Procter & Gamble, also known as 'the University of Marketing', where she learned brand management, commercial structure and a global outlook. P&G provided a solid grounding in data, analytics and consumer marketing.

At the BBC, Williams learned how to work at a larger scale. She also gained her first opportunity to work on a brand that's the incumbent in the UK and the challenger everywhere else, not unlike BT. Orange introduced Williams to telecoms and added experience with innovation, partnership and tone of voice.

Tone of voice

BT was among the early brands to take tone of voice seriously. Since 2007, BT has trained one out of five BT employees on how to apply its tone of voice guidelines. Call-centre employees, creative agencies and even the board learned how to deliver the BT tone of voice — and it's paid off.

"We've saved or made BT many millions of pounds through getting our tone right more often. Imagine — a simpler call-centre script reduces call times by 10%. In a company like BT that's not just a happier customer, it's a very substantial cost saving.

"Tone of voice is one of my favourite brand initiatives. That's because it costs so little and delivers not only a simpler, better, warmer brand experience, but it also saves money, and empowers and engages at the same time. So even the accountants like it."

In 2008, BT placed its first brave bet and announced plans to invest £1.5 billion in the rollout of a fibre broadband network across the UK. It was a visionary move that sits at the heart of BT's transformation.

Around the same time Williams was busy persuading the BT board to sponsor the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. It was a brave move in such a tough economic period but, as Williams says, "We love creating show-stopping moments for the brand, and London 2012 was an unmissable opportunity for the whole company to pull together and show BT at its best."

Delivering services for the 2012 Olympics stretched BT in many ways — the nature of the Olympics required BT to address a wide range of potential security threats. Commercially and technically, BT had to deliver while the whole world watched.

"We came out of London 2012 as the most recognised sponsor of the Games and the brand that had contributed most to the Games. To our customers we started to say, 'If we can do this for the Olympics, we can do it for your business.' And BT people were very proud," Williams recalls.

TV sports

The success of the London 2012 Games for BT paved the way for its third brave bet — moving boldly into the TV sports market. The company acquired broadcast rights from the football Premier League and created two new BT Sport channels.

"With BT Sport available in more than five million households, it makes us more compelling as a media and communications company. It's a new reason for customers to engage with BT in a new way. It gives us a new face to the market, transforming the way we're seen and how employees feel," Williams says.

"BT has always been an innovative and industrious organisation, but in 2015 we are standing a little taller with a bold, new confidence and a stronger belief in the future."

Now BT is preparing to help customers handle big data and connect the internet of things. The main constraint on big data's growth so far has been the requirement that humans enter the data — but machine-to-machine communications are removing that constraint, Williams observes.

"We're at the very start of this journey. Data is growing exponentially — but our philosophy is that data is only as useful as the questions you asked at the point it's collected. It's about getting the right data points, rather than sheer volume."

BT is demonstrating what the internet of things can deliver through the Milton Keynes Smart City project, the aim of which is to reduce the city's growth constraints and improve its citizens' quality of life.

So far the project has enabled:

- a 50% reduction in traffic congestion;
- savings of up to 20% in water;
- a 2.8% reduction in electricity consumption; and
- a 2% reduction in gas use.

To prepare for future customer demands including big data, now BT is further extending its fibre networks to reach 90% of UK homes and businesses. And BT has set out its vision for an ultrafast broadband network using G.fast technology, which can deliver speeds of up to 500 megabits a second to most homes and small businesses. If pilot tests prove successful, BT plans to deploy ultrafast speeds throughout the UK over the next decade.

Mobile move

BT plans to enter the mobile business through its proposed acquisition of EE, positioning BT to run both the UK's largest fibre network and its largest 4G network.

Over the years, Williams has honed a fine sense of what it takes to succeed in marketing. "Marketing is part art and part science, so whilst strategy and data are essential, instinct, insight and zeitgeist are important too," she observes.

"So don't get lost at a keyboard. Marketing happens in the real world where real people live. Don't be scared to go out and get to know your customers and stakeholders. Always hire people and agencies that push you and inspire you in equal measure.

"I like to balance the scale and resource of a big company with an entrepreneurial restlessness and creativity. What I call strategic patience is vital too: brands are long-term sustainable assets, and it's helpful to think with a longer view — especially through tough economic times," she adds.

"But in the final analysis excellence of execution is the bedrock of everything. So many great strategies fail in the execution."

Her advice to aspiring marketers: "Be curious. Be fascinated by people and technology. Immerse yourself in media of all kinds. Get a job that stretches you, scares you, and makes you uncomfortable. Pay attention to psychology and neuroscience but not too much. And learn to code, but just a little. Then roll up your sleeves, listen more than you talk — and remember to enjoy it!" ■