

FIGHTING TALK

It's not only consumer brands which have stories to tell, says Sage's head of brand marketing **Joanna Elliott**: B2B marketers too, must be brave and bold. She met **Lucy Fisher**

It's often said that the clothes we wear are an indicator of our personality. Joanna Elliott, head of brand marketing at business software provider, Sage, is dressed in black and white. She certainly looks the part of the ultimate professional.

She also looks glamorous – despite a hideously early start necessitated by her journey south to London from Newcastle, where Sage's headquarters are located – something you may expect, perhaps, from a marketer with several years' experience working for major cosmetics brands, such as Rimmel. In fact, Elliott was one of the team which worked on the repositioning of Rimmel London, at the point the brand signed Kate Moss onto its books.

Developing the brand

It was here, Elliott says, that she developed a "fascination with the concept of brand." "Brand isn't just something visual," she says. "Especially in a world where it's difficult to differentiate on product and service. It's about emotional connection; how much people like and value you. It's something which would remain after you sold your assets."

As the job title suggests, Elliott is responsible for developing the Sage brand, which she describes as "a combination of pragmatic and passionate; a marriage of the rational and the emotional." After joining the company, about three years ago, research conducted both internally and externally revealed that Sage was perceived as reliable and trustworthy, but perhaps not very exciting.

"One of the challenges when I joined was that, despite having all the raw ingredients, the message was disjointed,"

she admits. "We had almost forgotten how to 'bait' our customers. We were in a marriage – but we needed to be passionate too!"

Hence Sage's award-winning 'Train my Business Brain' campaign – which is due to run again this year, only 'bigger and better'. At the heart of this campaign is the sponsorship of *The Krypton Factor* TV programme, which Sage managed to persuade ITV1 bosses to recommission. Alongside this run a variety of social networking strategies, including a specially created partnership with LinkedIn. "Now, so much happens behind your back, on social media platforms," explains Elliott. "By using a combination of old and new channels, we tried to reflect the balance we strive for at Sage between innovation and delivering on software and service."

She says what she enjoys most, in her work, is having a vision and seeing it through: "I only worked in two companies before I joined Sage. It's about learning the role in the first year; proving you can do it in the second; and proving you can do it again in the third; that it wasn't just luck!"

Elliott, who has taken up boxing in her spare time, is clearly driven and describes herself as a perfectionist, and 'quite obsessive'. She admits to co-ordinating her socks, and even to scheduling loo breaks. "My zest for life is like my Grandad," she says. "He was the first man in his village to own a tractor, and at 97, when he could barely walk, he was talking about the house extension he wanted to build."

Elliott also credits Sage UK MD, Paul Stobart, with an ability to inspire her in her work, telling me that he calls a

customer a day, just to say 'hello'. "It's not just about the numbers at Sage," she says.

The importance of leadership

Her passion for the brand is evident. But, managing a team of 30, how does she find the day-to-day challenges of motivating her staff?

"At some point in your career," says Elliott, "you get to a point where you have to lead people and that's really difficult. But I find it incredibly enjoyable – you learn all the time."

She continues: "Someone once said to me, if the behaviour hasn't changed, the communication was wrong. If your staff aren't excited, you've done something wrong. Either you haven't communicated something properly or you should be performance managing someone."

Fortunately, Elliott says she has a 'great' team: "You have to deliver through your people. You can't settle for a lacklustre approach; your success depends on it."

She's serious. And she's determined that the 'incredible customer experience' at Sage be communicated effectively. "You can't say to someone over dinner, 'Let's talk about payroll'," she admits. "But Sage is a wonderful business, and there's a real passion for problem solving here."

She's working tirelessly to get that message across. It's Elliott's belief that B2B marketers have traditionally been stronger at selling rational features and benefits, whilst B2C marketers mastered the art of story telling earlier, thereby creating an emotional connection. "How many B2B brands do you really love?" she asks, to illustrate her point.

If she has anything to do with it, Sage will be one of them.



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