

How ING rejuvenated its brand by giving saving the feelgood factor

Despite the credit crunch and having no high street presence, ING Direct has grown by showing that it feels good to save, say **David Bain** and **Henry Lambert**, BMB

THIS IS THE STORY of how ING Direct went against the grain of banking communications to replace a bankrupt notion of trust with a more expansive and positive emotional basis for the brand.

Banking communications are often typified as unemotional and overly rational. Banking is viewed as one of those mythological 'low interest' categories. Why is a refrigerated box of hydrogenated fat considered more inherently interesting than a mortgage – a word that literally means a 'death pledge' (1)? But the underlying truth behind financial advertising is that it's full of emotion. One emotion in particular: trust.

Hence classic 'trust' communication strategies in banking, such as HSBC's 'The World's Local Bank' (leveraging scale) or the Barclay's 'Big' campaign. The funny thing is that hardly anyone used to notice this reliance on trust, the emotional bedrock upon which banking brands were built. It is only the recent crisis of trust in banking that has thrown this quiet, implicit emotion into stark relief.

Relationship of trust

It's not surprising that trust has been so consistently at the heart of banking sector marketing. The industry itself is built on the exchange of trust. Think about money. As the historian Niall Ferguson put it: "Bank notes are pieces of paper which have next to no intrinsic worth. They are simply promises to pay..." (2)

So there is no real value to money – it's just trust represented by an object. Ferguson states: "Money is a matter of belief, even faith: belief in the person paying us; belief in the person issuing the money he uses or the institution that honours his cheques or transfers. Money is not metal. It is trust inscribed."

This is the way banks have operated since time immemorial and we have become used to it. Money was a certainty, like death and taxes. If you put money in a bank, it stayed there. Forever. Banks did not go bust – they didn't even get robbed any more. The most resonant cultural representation of the banker remained Mr Banks from *Mary Poppins*, all stiff-lipped



Above: ING's 'Giggle' commercial. **Opposite:** press ads tying in with the brand's 'Puddle' (top) and 'Wheelie' executions

propriety and dependable, stolid values.

The recent economic boom was as much a trust bubble as a monetary one. Bad debts were repackaged by experts, rated by agencies and sold on the global market in an intricate, interdependent system of misplaced trust.

But on 14 September 2007, Northern Rock was subjected to the first run on a British bank since 1866, becoming the first UK victim of what was to become known as the credit crunch. Trust, the most fundamental building block of financial brands, was crumbling.

As the tentacles of sub-prime reached further into the world of finance, so its impact on culture and consumer mood increased. People were feeling the crisis in institutional trust – and it hurt.

A survey from Pulse Research (3) demonstrated how stark the changes were: 60% of British people were uncertain in 2008, compared with 47% in 2007; 13% were hopeful in 2008, compared with 22% in 2007; and 39% were angry in 2008, compared with 30% in 2007.

It was in the face of these changes that ING Direct decided to radically overhaul its communication strategy and positioning. Launched into the UK in 2003, ING Direct is an online and telephone savings bank, part of ING, one of the world's largest banks. The brand had grown rapidly in its first two years to reach over a million customers. It had worn the responsible, sombre clothes of trust, with highly rational and disciplined communications that emphasised a market-beating savings rate and premium brand values – a successful strategy entirely appropriate to more stable times.

But with growth came change. As a bigger, broader brand, ING Direct took the commercial decision to move away from a market-beating savings rate to one that was 'merely' highly competitive. The brand had become famous for a high interest rate and little more. This change of trading position led to a loss of momentum. Then came the credit crunch and the gaping fissures in the edifice of trust on which all banks had built their brands.

Without a stellar rate, and in a faltering economic climate, people had started to question the ING Direct brand. It was a foreign bank, with no high street presence, and was no longer at the top of the best buy tables. Acquisition costs were rising and the swathes of financially savvy customers who had joined the brand in happier times were chasing rates and moving elsewhere. To make matters worse, when ING Direct failed to pass on increases in the Bank of England base rate to savers, the financial press duly stuck the knife in.

Not only was the ING Direct brand losing the trust game, but the game itself was strained to breaking point as trust fled all the banking brands. So, finding a completely new emotional footing for the brand was a necessity as we approached the darkest hours of 2008.

Outsider's advantage

Thankfully, the brand's outsider status and internal culture combined to guide ING Direct and Beattie McGuinness Bungay to a different type of consumer relationship and a less precarious emotional foundation for the brand.

Stripped of its conservative advertising, the brand was a lurid orange outsider in the UK market, without branches, heritage or incumbency. In an environment where the institutional banks were looking less like bastions of the establishment and more like ships of motley fools, being an outsider proved the best place to be.

During our strategic development, we found an organisation full of lovely, ambitious and smart people with an inherent positivity and sunniness in all they did. They liked their work, their customers and their company. They came to work

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because it made them feel good. This spirit wasn't accurately reflected in the brand communications and it pointed towards emotions more powerful than the pallid notion of 'trust'; positivity, likeability, optimism and 'feel-good' provided an antidote to the dark times of current financial markets. These were emotions intrinsic to ING Direct but extrinsic to financial services – outsider emotions from the heart of the company.

Amid all the financial anxiety of early 2008, we found that these emotions were also at the heart of consumers' relationship to saving. After all, when people save, they are taking a step towards being in control of their own destiny (or just that little bit closer to a new car). They are making a down-payment on their own future happiness.

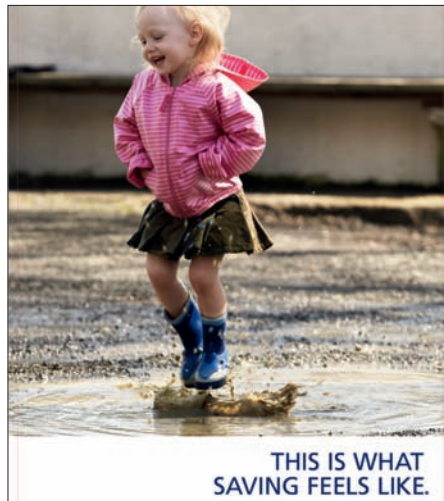
Enjoyable experience

In conversation with some rather nervous savers in Timperley, Cheshire, we discovered that saving was not only something they felt they ought to do, but something they actually enjoyed doing. The act was its own reward, psychologically satisfying and much more than a delayed gratification or an umbrella for a rainy day.

Our investigation of ING Direct had hinted at it, and now our consumer research told us it was true: saving actually felt pretty good. This simple notion became the brand's mantra. We resolved to build the brand on the foundations of the warm, secure and uplifting feelings that came from saving your money with ING Direct.

The TV ads best brought to life the emotional power of the idea. Five ads were made to capture the different life stages of our audience and different dimensions of 'the saving feeling'. 'Puddle' featured a little girl dancing in a puddle, 'Wheelie' showed a young cyclist pulling his first-ever wheelie, 'Giggle' brought us two old ladies chuckling together, 'Dog' depicted a spaniel enjoying the breeze in an open-top car, and 'Snowball' showed a family enjoying the snow together.

All of the work was rich with emotion and demonstrated the positive feelings associated with saving – achievement,



freedom and security. They were optimistic, sunny and, most importantly, provided the stimulus for viewers to feel good in a bleak economic environment.

With hindsight, we can see that we were actually building a financial service brand for a post-trust world. Through intuition and judgement, we struck upon a different kind of emotional material on which to build a financial service brand.

But our immediate objectives were more practical and prosaic. At its simplest, we wanted to shift communications from 'rate response' to 'brand response' and acquire new customers based on brand consideration, rather than simply rate advantage. To do this, we needed to attract the less financially savvy but more mainstream saver (those less likely to shift

from the bricks-and-mortar bank establishment). The results gave us all something to feel good about.

Brand tracking demonstrated that the advertising had shifted both awareness (increased by 12%) and consideration (increased by 90%) among our mainstream saver target audience. More importantly, sales increased by 194% and the value of deposits rose by 36.3% year-on-year.

Winning recommendations

Econometrics showed that the shift from rate response to brand response had paid dividends. Not only had customers become less rate sensitive, but the new advertising was four times more effective at generating consideration than the previous work, and advertising is accounting for a larger share of accounts than ever.

The campaign has also had longer-lasting impacts. Unlike the high street banks, with their reliance on trust, ING Direct has risen to the top of financial services' net promoter score. This meant that people weren't just happy; they were actually recommending ING Direct.

Finally, the campaign has encouraged ING Direct to shift its creative ambitions. No longer constrained by being in a 'low interest category', the ambition is to create effective work through creativity and deeper emotional connection. According to Synovate's 'Emotional Connections' score, our 'Puddle' ad outperformed the likes of Cadbury's 'Trucks', Puma, Mars, Flake and Lloyds TSB.

By finding a different emotional foundation to the dominant but moribund notion of trust in banking, ING Direct has rejuvenated its brand. It has found a platform that celebrates the unsung joys of saving and reminded savers that, regardless of the interest rate, the act of saving feels good.

1 www.etymonline.com

2 *The Ascent of Money*, Niall Ferguson

3 *Moodier Britain*, Pulse Research, 2008

 more on financial services marketing at www.warc.com