

**Not Just Advertising, Your M&S Advertising: By Tanya Livesey (M&S Business Director) and Lucy Howard (M&S Planner) RKCR / Y&R**

This is the story of how confident communications changed the public face of a very public company:

*“The curious thing about M&S is how much we know and care about it. It’s more than just another department store. We follow its ups and downs almost as if it were part of our extended family” Justin Picardie, The Telegraph, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2006*

M&S is subject to public scrutiny of everything that it does. Everyone has a point of view on how it’s doing and we are all quick to criticise when M&S gets it wrong. Never has a retail brand been so at the mercy of the whims of public confidence – and never has a retail brand needed an injection of public confidence like M&S needed only two years ago.

Headlines prophesised doom and gloom and screamed stories of Philip Green’s proposed take-over bid, boardroom battles, ‘War on the high street’, declining sales and plummeting share prices.

However, fast forward two years to April 2006 when M&S smashed expectations by announcing a fourth quarter increase in UK sales of 9.1% on the year and the world for the once ailing retail giant is a very different place. Food sales were up 8.4%, whilst sales of general merchandise rose by 9.1%. One blouse worn by Twiggy, one of the stars of the M&S campaign, sold more in one week than any other product in the history of M&S. Likewise, M&S Food advertising saw a national stampede on chocolate pudding – selling out all over the country in 48 hours. When Stuart Rose’s team took over 2 years ago one of their key goals was to raise and sustain the M&S share price above the mooted 400p per share offer from Revival Acquisitions – this year its share price peaked at just over £6.

There is no doubt about it – communications have played an incredibly important role in this most extraordinary of turnaround stories:

*“In reality, this has been one of the more advertising led recovery stories we’ve watched and it’s working”*  
Rod Whitehouse, Deutsche Bank, ‘No Ordinary Recovery’ 30.3.06

So what were the principles to which the communications adhered, and what can we learn from the transformation of this very British institution?

**See the bigger picture**

What Marks and Spencer needed was a big idea that could make the country fall in love with the brand again. An idea that could work across diverse audiences from wavering current shoppers to cynical city analysts, and an idea that could showcase diverse products – from fashion to food to homeware to knickers.

A big idea indeed...and so ‘Your M&S’ was conceived: a powerful, colloquial and symbolic handing back of the rightful ownership of the brand to the British public. Rich in meaning and broad enough to have resonance in any product category, it also had relevance for any and every audience. Importantly it was a big idea that united the disparate parts of the business giving it an umbrella to sit under, a sense of purpose and direction, an idea that understood that M&S’s future rested on the business starting to operate cohesively and to speak in one voice.

### **Tackle the issues head on**

It would have been easy to invest in the quick wins for the business – lingerie and food – historically the more successful areas. But turning around the perceptions of style and value amongst women was the crucial battle that we could not shy away from. We understood that whilst M&S's public demise had been in front of an audience of men, its revival had to be in front of an audience of women. Put simply – we had to start delighting the girls again. We understood that any gains we made in transforming the fortunes of the food business would be for naught if we didn't revitalise the real heart of the business: womenswear.

### **Have confidence**

M&S was bowed, but not broken. In order for the public to believe in M&S once more, it was critical that M&S behaved like they believed in themselves. Every element of the communication was designed to demonstrate a new confidence and vigour; a determination to reclaim their rightful place in the hearts of the nation. Great music tracks, high production values, well chosen stars and a lightness of touch were all crucial in driving reappraisal.

### **Re-establish your credentials**

Historically, M&S had led the high street in terms of responsible retailing. However, it appeared to the public that this giant had been sleeping of late; following instead of leading and failing to really push the boundaries. Nothing could be further from the truth, and the 'Look Behind the Label' print campaign sought to re-establish M&S's ethical credentials by highlighting the extra lengths that this retailer goes to, be it in banning 'nasties' from food products to reducing the harmful dyes used in clothing production.

### **Understand the power of PR**

Of all British retailers, M&S is the one that generates the most column inches – positive or otherwise. M&S had become trapped in a vicious cycle of negative PR, falling consumer confidence and plummeting sales. We wanted to reverse this cycle. Thus the generation of positive PR was an explicit aim for communications, and influenced everything from our aim to deliver ideas that would enter the vernacular to the casting of famous models with broad appeal for womenswear.

### **Let the product sing**

Of course communications cannot take sole responsibility for the reversal of M&S's fortunes. Stuart Rose's investment in high profile buyers like Kate Bostock had revolutionised the product. Our job was to make them sing, be the product a chocolate pudding or a cardigan.

Too many retailers fall into the trap of trying to come up with clever ideas that get in the way of the product story. The beauty of the Your M&S campaign is that, across the board from food to fashion, it allows the product to be the hero. Like we say in our new lingerie campaign 'If you've got it, flaunt Your M&S'.