Holiday Inn Express
Disrupting the Budget Hotel Category

Best Communications Campaign Award Entry

26.09.2013
Holiday Inn Express was launched in the UK in 1996. However, in 2012 the brand had just 4% unaided awareness in the UK, which was 15 times less than our main competitor Premier Inn. In addition, it lived in the shadow of its much better-known sibling, Holiday Inn.

Given these circumstances, the 2013 brand positioning campaign needed to raise awareness for the Holiday Inn Express brand by carving out a unique and differentiated personality for the brand that would a) elevate it from the budget category by demonstrating added value, and b) separate it from its sibling brand.
Definition of the Strategy

In a category where numbers and pillow fights rule, the 2013 communications campaign for Holiday Inn Express aimed to break category norms, by positioning a budget hotel based on what it really does for its guests (appealing to our consumers’ mindset and stay occasion), rather than simply communicating price points.

Our target guests don’t just need a cheap hotel, they need a hotel that understands them and gives them everything they need and nothing they don’t.
The Holiday Inn Express campaign is unique in that it is not just a communications campaign in the normal sense of the word. Instead, we have created an idea that runs across the entire organisation. Given that this is a service category, we understand that the brand personality must live and breathe onsite and through those that help to deliver the experience each day. That's why the Holiday Inn Express campaign not only aims to create brand equity with guests, but also aims to galvanise hotel staff.
What are the innovative aspects and major assets of this campaign?

This campaign is innovative in terms of its strategy, messaging and channel choice.

**Strategic Innovation**
This campaign moved completely away from the norms of the budget category. Rather than communicating price points or talking about the softness of our beds and pillows, our approach was insight-led. It was driven by what people really want from stopover hotel stays, not by what the category thinks that they want.

**Messaging Innovation**
Having created a strategic idea that truly disrupted the budget hotel category, we ensured that the advertising also deviated from category norms in the way that it was executed. The set for the TV adverts was a new way for the brand (and the category) to advertise, as historically all adverts have been shot inside our hotels. The high impact, quirky spots bring the brand personality to life in a humorous and disruptive way. Each spot is very clear about the benefits that Holiday Inn Express offers to its guests. However, each of these amenities is viewed through a human lens, speaking directly to the consumer’s needs and demonstrating how the brand delivers everything you need and nothing you don’t.

**Channel Innovation**
The Holiday Inn Express campaign is not just advertising. It truly runs through the veins and arteries of the organisation, from communications down to Service Operating Procedures and GM activations. Given that this is a service category, we knew that the experience of our product needed to live up to the personality of the TV adverts, through our hotels and staff members living and breathing the brand message: “Simple. Smart. Spot On”. This led to our most innovative approach to Local Hotel Marketing for the brand, ensuring that the brand spoke to consumers in the same unique tone of voice at all points of the guest journey.
What are the major targets (customer segments, age groups, socio-professional categories, etc.)?

The typical way of defining the audience for a budget hotel would be domestic guests who are usually between the ages of 25-44; predominately male and likely married.

However, in identifying the key target audience for the Holiday Inn Express campaign, we segmented consumers in an entirely new way and redefined the target based on consumer needs rather than demographics or professions.

We identified the primary audience for Holiday Inn Express as the “Stopover Guest”. By this we mean people who are staying in the hotel for 1-2 nights as part of a trip that has a specific purpose that isn’t related to the hotel. (e.g. early morning meeting, concert, theatre trip). As the hotel is not the main focus of their trip, their main requirement from the hotel is that it delivers a smooth, efficient and engaging experience. As a result, their choice of hotel is determined by the overall experience they want from the trip, and not just things like price, bar, restaurant, etc.
How was the strategy determined?

Our strategy was determined through a combination of understanding our category, our audience and our brand.

An examination of communication within the budget category uncovered some clear themes. Communication is replete with prices, seasonal deals, “Book Now” messages and promises of comfortable beds and soft pillows.

Within a sea of sameness, there was a clear opportunity for a brand to stand out with a differentiated message. What could this message be? We needed to understand our audience’s travel plan and not just the hotel stay to uncover what this differentiation might look like.
How was the strategy determined?

In order to understand what our target consumer was looking for in a budget hotel, we looked at their entire journey, rather than just their hotel stay, in order to identify their key needs.

We mapped the Customer Journey through depth interviews with consumers. From this it became clear that people’s choice of hotels is determined by the needs they have for a stay occasion, whether that is a relaxing break, proximity to a tourist attraction, meeting rooms etc.

It is not just about the price or facilities that a hotel offers. These only form part of the picture, and are secondary to the desired experience.

Guests therefore wanted a hotel that understood them and gave them just what they wanted. However, nobody in the category was speaking in that language.
How was the strategy determined?

Finally, to identify the consumer needs that Holiday Inn Express could answer to, we looked to the brand itself.

By consulting with a semiotician, we looked at the meaning of the term “Express” in popular culture.

All definitions denoted speed, efficiency and movement. Crucially, nothing suggested “budget” or price.

This discovery connected well with our audience’s needs. Efficiency, created by an understanding of their needs, was at least as important to them as price, if not more.

We now had our answer. We would create a campaign that demonstrated how well we understood our audience and offered them the things that were most important to them.
At Holiday Inn Express, we recognise that your hotel isn’t a destination by itself. You just want a place that helps you make the most of your trip. We know it’s the trip, the occasion and the experience that matters, and not the hotel facilities. In fact, there are quite a few things that we’ve learnt about our guests.

For instance, we understand that people are prone to forgetting small items like toothbrushes. They appreciate a hot breakfast in the morning (especially if it’s free!) and like to know that they’re getting the best deals.

But it doesn’t end here, because at Holiday Inn Express we are passionate about understanding you and delivering only the most useful, time-saving and satisfying products. This aim informs everything we do: from designing the hotel, to planning your experience inside the property, to the final service that is delivered. It’s a service that is designed with the individual in mind, which helps us offer our guests everything they need, and nothing they don’t.

You might notice things like our simple booking process, free breakfast, free Wi-Fi, our ‘forgotten something promise’ and overall streamlined service. Some call it smart, others call it thoughtful –we just like to think it’s spot on.

*Holiday Inn Express. Simple. Smart. Spot on.*
Moving from the strategy to the creative idea

At Holiday Inn Express, we understand people... everything they need and nothing they don’t.

That’s why we deliver only the most useful, time-saving and satisfying experience.

• Free Wi-Fi
• Free Breakfast
• Best Price Guarantee
• Forgotten Something Promise

Some call it smart, others call it thoughtful – we just like to think it’s spot on.
Was the campaign tested before its actual launching, and how?

Whilst we had identified a smooth, efficient experience as a key consumer need, we wanted to identify the best way of conveying this to consumers.

Three potential creative routes were tested qualitatively in three different locations in the UK.

Not only did we test potential TV and outdoor routes, we also identified key drivers for booking and ascertained the most desirable hotel features to communicate.

We learnt that one of our ideas was absolutely hitting the mark, and that free breakfast and free Wi-Fi were the most desirable features during their stay.
Qualitative research indicated that free Wi-Fi was one of the most compelling features that Holiday Inn Express could offer both its business and leisure guests. At the time of research, it was also seen as being a differentiator within the budget category.

Knowing that free Wi-Fi could act as a valuable attribute for the brand, we engaged our hotel owners and worked together to deliver free Wi-Fi across the estate in time for our campaign launch.

Initial guest feedback demonstrates that people both notice and appreciate this new addition to our hotels.

Free Wi-Fi was brilliant.

Fast reliable Internet without messing around to connect to it, and being able to use it with all our devices.

Hassle free, no gimmicks, no hidden charges. Free breakfast, free internet.

I was made very welcome by staff. The room was good with free Wi-Fi.

After a 1600 round trip over the Bank Holiday weekend, very happy to have free internet access from our room!
Quality and Scope of the Campaign

How long did it take to create the campaign?
February – September (7 months)

Was this campaign managed internally or produced by a specialised agency?
The campaign was managed within IHG. However, it was developed by the appointed advertising agency for Europe, JWT London.

What is the scope of the campaign (national, regional, global)?
Paid for media channels (Digital, TV, Radio) were used in the UK, whilst the rest of Europe was supported by IHG owned and earned channels (In hotel collateral, IHG website, apps, rewards programme, PR).

What is the anticipated duration of the campaign?
The first burst of the campaign will run for 3 months above the line, however activity will continue throughout 2014.

What is the budget allocated to this campaign?
USD$6.1 million
What media channels were used to promote the image or the products of the brand or hotel group? And how?

The Holiday Inn Express campaign included TV, Video On Demand, Radio (7.10), Radio Promotion (Absolute), Digital banners and take overs, social media, Brand website, in-hotel collateral, Business to Business, GM activation, Service Operating Procedures, Training Guides and PR (from mid Oct)
What media channels were used to promote the image or the products of the brand or hotel group? And how?

Given that the key objective of this campaign was to raise awareness for the Holiday Inn Express brand, the lion’s share of the media spend was spent on broadcast media.

We used a mixture of ‘awareness and consideration’ driven media, such as TV, as well as ‘preference and choice’ media, which was focused around people’s online journey of looking for a hotel and finally booking it. At the ‘awareness and consideration’ level, we focused on messaging that is primarily emotionally led, with key RTBs as support, but for the ‘preference and choice’ stage, we focused on key features that often influence choice, albeit viewed from the ‘Simple. Smart. Spot On.’ lens.

Furthermore, we understood the importance of the message living and breathing on property and therefore LHM and service operating procedures for staff were also a key area of focus.

This method of truly integrated delivery represents a new approach for IHG, ensuring that the campaign idea lives beyond just advertising.
Our approach to LHM ensures that the campaign look and feel is brought to life at every stage of the guest journey.
We designed materials that could support our sales teams in delivering the “Simple. Smart. Spot On.” message.
Performance

The Holiday Inn Express campaign launched on 9th September 2013. As a result, it is too early to provide evidence of campaign effect at this stage.

Estimation of the number of customers, current and potential, that have been or will be reached by this Campaign
The overall combined reach against our target audience for the campaign is 15,747. This equates to 96.20% with an OTS of 15.23. (Calculated using Touch points)

Do you intend to extend this campaign? In what form?
The first burst of activity began in September 2013. This will continue into 2014 on a test and learn basis.

We deliberately designed a campaign idea that would truly galvanise the business. Broadcast communication engages audiences with humorous stories of how we design our product efficiently, based on thoughtfully observed human behaviour. In line with these aims, the campaign is currently rolling out at an operational level, encouraging in-hotel staff to suggest changes and additions to the hotel experience in line with behaviour they observe from guests in their hotels.
SIMPLE • SMART • SPOT ON
Thank You