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What's  
The big ideaL™?

*Colin Mitchell &  
John Sharw*

The Red Papers:

Ogilvy

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The Red Papers:

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## Big ideas and big ideaLs

Every now and again, someone important announces the death of branding. Various reasons are given for it: increasingly sophisticated consumers, media fragmentation, corporate greed, and so on. But countless global brands are still alive and kicking, as are any number of brands with smaller footprints. The pressures on branding are real enough, but many brands are flourishing in spite of them. What do they have in common? The clue might lie in an assertion we first heard in 2006, uttered by Robyn Putter, then the leader of the Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide Creative Council, and now sadly with us only in spirit. “The brands we most admire are built not just on big ideas, but on big ideaLs” was what he said. Robyn’s observation was that, vital as ideas are, great brands tend to be built on underpinning ideals that give guidance to all aspects of brand and company activity. They project a certain point of view on the world that engages people both within and beyond the organization, and they radiate the values and commitment needed to

bring that ideal to fruition. They appear to be driven by something beyond simply the next set of figures. IBM aims to make the planet smarter. If that's not an ideal, then what is?

Literally, an ideal is “a conception of something in its perfection.”<sup>1</sup> A “big ideaL” takes that ethically rooted notion of the ideal and extends it into the world as it is lived, out of the realm of thought and into the churn of commerce. It is the concise description of the ideal at the heart of a brand or a company identity – its deeply held conviction on how the world, or some particular part of it, should be. Brands and companies with this crisp focus benefit not only in terms of communications, but also internally and in all the many ways they interact with the world around them. It is a “big ideaL” not a “brand ideal” because it has the potential to affect the way whole organizations think and behave rather than just the way their brands are marketed.



THE BRANDS WE MOST ADMIRE ARE BUILT  
NOT JUST ON BIG IDEAS, BUT ON BIG IDEALS

*What's  
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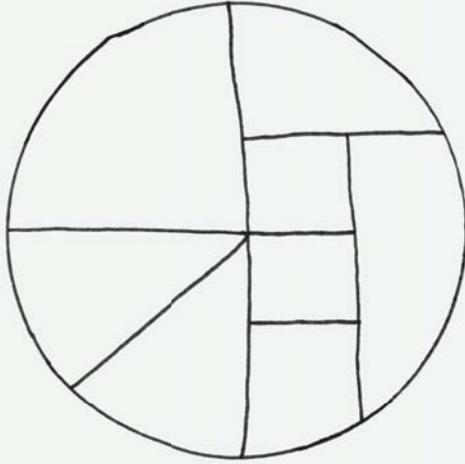
## What is The big ideaL?

The big ideaL is best expressed in a short phrase that captures the company's or brand's point of view on the world, or on life, or on the country in which it operates. Despite being short and memorable, The big ideaL is not a tagline. It is a highly structured form that conveys the ethos of the brand or company to people from different cultures and to employees and consumers alike. It can be said in just seconds, but doing the necessary thinking to get it absolutely right takes months. It is simple, but not simplistic.

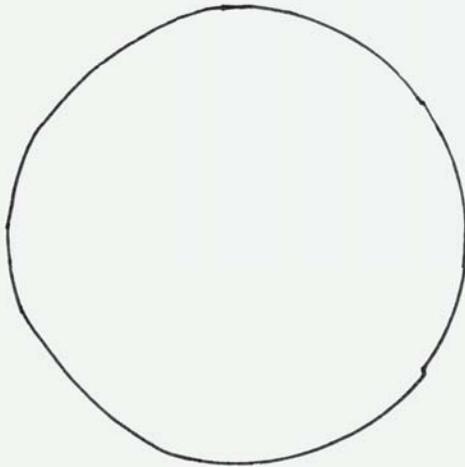
**This structure is:**

**“(Brand/company) \_\_\_\_\_ believes the world  
would be a better place if \_\_\_\_\_.”**

Try completing the sentence for brands you are familiar with, brands that have momentum and a clear sense of identity. It might take a little while, but chances are you can come up with something that feels interesting, maybe even provocative, and quite specific to that brand. Try completing it for poorly focused and directionless brands, and you'll struggle. If you just force-fit a functional product claim, it will feel self-serving. The statement forces you to express some kind of higher purpose.



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## big ideaLs and business

It's easy to think of business and idealism as uneasy bedfellows, particularly if you've ever been to the movies. From *Citizen Kane* to *Enron*, through *Wall Street* and *Erin Brockovich*, business and idealism have been presented as natural opposites. Yet the real history of business is very different. Many great modern businesses and brands stem from the ideals of their founders. In the 1890s William Hesketh Lever wrote down his ideals for Sunlight Soap: "to make cleanliness commonplace; to lessen work for women; to foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness, that life may be more enjoyable and rewarding for the people who use our products." Thomas Watson Sr. of IBM promulgated the slogan "world peace through world trade" and advocated "the exchange not only of goods and services but of men and methods, ideas and ideals." Many Japanese companies have long placed societal benefits at the center of their philosophies. And although a cynic could perhaps put some degree of corporate idealism down to a desire to make the accumulation of money seem more acceptable, even the most hardened ones could not doubt the good intent behind, say, Bournville Village, built by George Cadbury to "alleviate the evils of modern, more cramped living conditions." The history of business contains a great deal of idealism, just as it contains large amounts of cynicism and greed.

*"...the exchange not only of goods and services  
but of men and methods, ideas and ideals."*

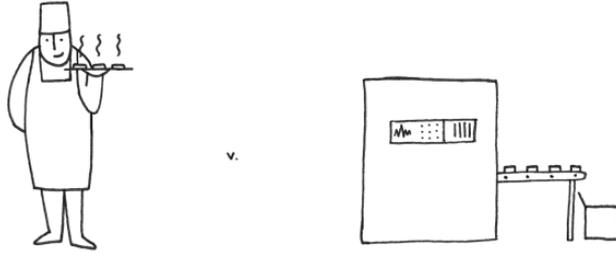
But idealism and commercialism are not polar opposites. In fact, as counterintuitive as it may seem, sustainable profits are supported by sustainable idealism. Brand owners should not have to choose between idealism and profit, and profits based on a degree of idealism are more likely to be strong and sustainable over time.



Business has become more fluid and transparent since the Internet liberated information and lubricated communication. It's easier than ever for people to decide whether they approve of businesses and institutions and to share those feelings with other interested parties. Audiences cannot be neatly segmented and isolated, with this one knowing that and that one knowing this. For companies with appealing philosophies and beliefs, this creates great opportunity. Those with something to hide see this as a threat.

The differences between good and bad companies are thrown into relief for all to see, even if what constitutes “good” and “bad” differs depending on your point of view.

*What's  
The big ideaL?*



CRAFT v. MASS

Consumers demand greater awareness of environmental and social issues, and businesses have had to replace the “profit at any cost” mentality with a means for earning responsibly. Businesses can no longer escape the consequences of the behavior of their supply chains, and they are more likely than ever to collaborate with other businesses. No matter what the arena, businesses want their objectives, and those of their brands, to be attractive and easily defensible. While the economic crisis has tested some companies’ resolve, the fundamental factors that encourage them to espouse inspiring missions and defensible practices are unlikely to wane. In fact, we are seeing the opposite: there are many signs that consumers are looking for a new substance behind business.

Several writers on business and marketing have emphasized the value of a powerful, attractive goal. John Kay’s article, and now book, on “Obliquity” makes the point that “the most profitable companies are not the most profit-oriented.”<sup>2</sup> Aiming at a different (and higher) goal produces better returns for stockholders, assuming a sensible alignment between those higher goals and commercial realities. Consider this in human terms: fewer talented people nowadays want to work for a company that has the sole aim of making as much money as it possibly can. Most of the best people – particularly the workforce of the future – want something more, and they want to work for the companies that can provide that.

Having better people gives companies a better chance of beating their competitors and being financially successful over time. In a world where employees are more than ever the public face of brands, both online and offline, this is particularly important. There is also evidence that people work more productively if they attach meaning to their work<sup>3</sup>. Other writers to have documented the power of purpose in business include Mark Earls<sup>4</sup>, Collins and Porras<sup>5</sup>, and Roy Spence<sup>6</sup>.

However, brands will not realize the power of their purpose without an extremely practical tool to help companies with marketing and communications issues as well as their overall direction. Many visions sound good but fail to be acted on in practice, because they are too complex or inhuman to be memorable or connect with people. As long ago as 1999, the *Cluetrain Manifesto* observed (a little wishfully) that “In just a few more years, the current homogenized ‘voice’ of business – the sound of mission statements and brochures – will seem as contrived and artificial as the language of the 18th century French court.” The big ideaL is a practical and human way of connecting a company or brand’s purpose with the real people who can make it come to life. A strong big ideaL helps those who work in a company to feel good about doing so, it gives stakeholders such as journalists and investors a feeling of momentum and focus, it sets expectations for business partners, and it gives consumers a reason to think, talk, and maybe even get excited about a particular brand or company. A focused ideal stands in stark contrast to a forgettable corporate goal that is of little interest beyond the annual report. Nor is a big ideaL a set of inchoate values that no one can easily remember and which are the same as everyone else’s anyway. An ideal is a shared and easily articulated understanding of what the company or brand believes in. Rather than being a piece of aimless motivational garbage, a big ideaL expresses something people would not be embarrassed about discussing in a pub or with a supplier. It gets at something authentic, and it can help companies and brands take market-leading positions – and market-leading profits.

*What's  
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“In just a few more years, the current homogenized ‘voice’ of business – the sound of mission statements and brochures – will seem as contrived and artificial as the language of the 18th century French court.”

*- The Cluetrain Manifesto*

*What's The big ideaL?*



18<sup>TH</sup> Century  
*France*

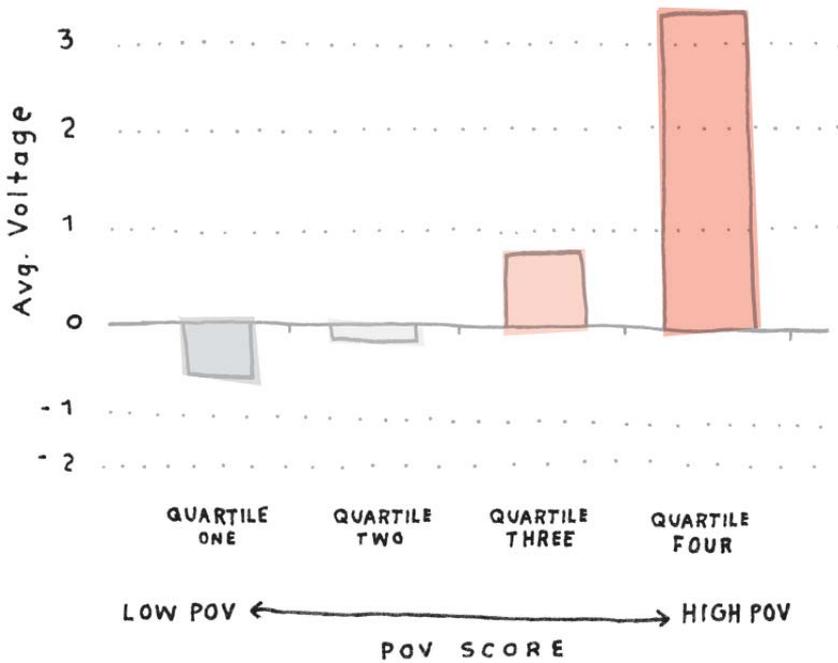
*What's  
The big ideaL?*

## big ideaLs work

The frequently cited tension between idealism and profit is a false choice. Profits based on a degree of idealism are more likely to be strong and sustainable over time. Ogilvy has carried out two consumer research studies that demonstrate the business value of big ideaLs. In the first study (2,000 consumers in eight countries through Added Value Research)<sup>7</sup> several pairs of brands such as Coke and Pepsi, Apple and Microsoft, were contrasted to determine the degree to which people saw each of them as having a point of view or, in other words, a big ideaL. Some brands are seen as having a much clearer big ideaL than others, and this is not simply a function of brand size. Crucially, there is a correlation between having a clear big ideaL and brand consideration, positive opinion, and salience. The strongest of these is with good opinion – an increasingly important property in a world where audiences are connected and brand conversations are public. Eighty-two percent of brands with a high point-of-view/big ideaL rating were seen as being the best, or one of the best, brands in their category. For those with a low rating, the corresponding figure was only fifty-two percent.

In another study, we explored the relationship of big ideaLs to brand dynamism and predicted purchase behavior. We compared the strength of a brand's big ideaL with brand strength as measured by the "Brand Voltage" metric on WPP/Millward Brown's BrandZ, a strong predictor of brand share growth or decline.

There is a strong correlation between the extent to which a brand is seen as having a big ideaL (a POV) and its Brand Voltage. Although many factors contribute to a brand's propensity to grow market share, there is no doubt that those brands with big ideaLs are in a better position to do so:



## The uses of The big ideaL

Although The big ideaL is not a silver bullet for driving brand growth or doing great communications, having one can be extremely helpful when it's deployed correctly. These are some situations in which a big ideaL can be most helpful.

### *When an organization needs its purpose articulated*

Imagine someone in your organization meets a stranger in a pub or a café. They get talking. The stranger asks what they do and they say they work for you, on your brand. The stranger says: “What’s that like then? What do you get out of that?” For many CEOs, imagining this conversation can be a little scary. Most people are not going to recite the company’s mission statement or brand values at this point. But ideally, they’ll be in a position to say something positive and anecdotal, like they’re putting a smile on people’s faces or they’re bringing good design to a wide audience. A well-written big ideaL can help here, simply by giving employees an easy-to-remember purpose that is as suitable for the pub as it is for the boardroom or the shareholder meeting.

*When a “parent” brand’s meaning needs definition*

Many, if not most, brands are part of brand families that have different levels of identity. Sometimes the parent brand may dominate the sub-brands or product brands (e.g. BMW). Sometimes it acts as an “umbrella” to a group of products (e.g. Nescafé, Knorr, Sprite). Or it may play a less visible role behind a very varied range (e.g. Unilever). But for the parent brand to impart a benefit, it must carry a meaning. Even the visual language of a logo carries meaning. A strong big ideaL helps this meaning to be crystallized in a rich but easy to remember way. Those working with it can easily grasp what they can do to make it stronger.

*When a market lacks a “thought leader”*

A brand or an organization’s big ideaL can still be useful even when not conveyed directly through brand communications. Often, however, the opportunity arises to project it directly. This, as research has shown, boosts share growth, perceived leadership, and other material indicators. This tactic comes into its own when a market lacks a clear thought leader. Brands, in such an environment, compete mainly on price or functional benefits, and the potential for a brand with a point of view can be enormous. It can result in the transformation of a whole category, as happened with athletic footwear and Nike. A functionality-driven category is not closed off to more emotional, philosophy-driven positioning; often, it is quite the reverse.

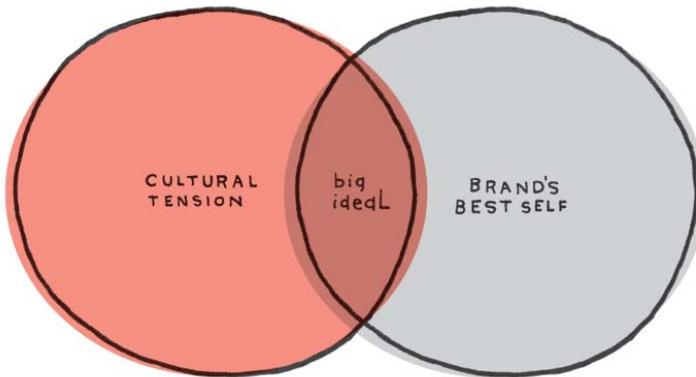
*When a brand or company needs greater cultural connection*

The search for cultural tension is inherent in the process of developing a big ideaL, and this has never been more the case than now. Brands with relevance to popular culture can reap huge rewards from the huge and instantaneous connectedness of much of the world. But brands that lack either cultural congruity or the physical means to connect will have less and less ability to make their voice heard. People have plenty of better things to be getting on with.

*What's  
The big ideaL?*

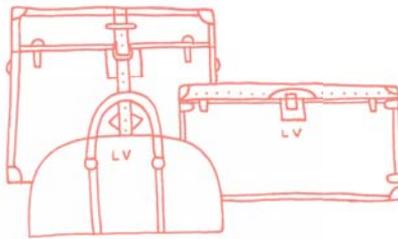
What makes a good big ideaL?

big ideaLs exist in the intersection between two things. (Maybe more, but two big ones.)



First, they connect to a cultural tension. If “Markets are conversations,”<sup>8</sup> then leading brands need to be interesting conversationalists. They are worth listening to when they have a valid point of view on the big topics of the day – when they connect to something that resonates within culture. Coke’s famously utopian “Hilltop” advertising was conceived

against the backdrop of the Vietnam war, and Louis Vuitton's Exceptional Journeys campaign had a particular resonance against a backdrop of commoditized and queue-ridden air travel. (Doug Holt has written eloquently about the opportunities provided by cultural tension.<sup>9</sup>) A strong big ideaL will resolve tensions that are prominent at any given time, but cultural tensions do shift over time as do The big ideaLs they animate. Some big ideaLs, for the largest brands and companies, may be addressed to something that is less a cultural tension and more a fundamental issue of the human condition, such as the persistence of things that make us pessimistic or the intrinsic problems with mass travel. These may change more slowly.



LOUIS VUITTON

At its heart Louis Vuitton has a belief in travel, not just from A to B, but for its own sake. Yet anyone who has, for example, spent much time travelling on domestic flights within the United States would agree that travel has lost much of its magic. Louis Vuitton's heritage as craftsmen of luxury travel goods for great voyages gives the company a unique right to elevate travel and use it as an inspiring metaphor for life.

*What's  
The big ideaL?*

Boarding



These cultural tensions must be globally relevant, especially when working with global brands. Culture varies across the earth, and while a global cultural tension should not be forced, what may appear to be a purely regional factor may prove, with further analysis, to be a nuance of a larger global tension.

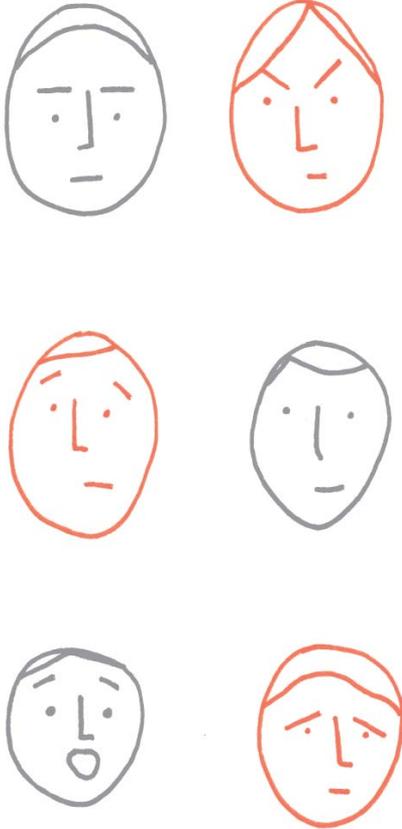
A good big ideaL will also be built on the brand's "best self." This is what uniquely makes, or could make, that brand great. Rather than a list of benefits, the brand's best self is formed from the little pieces of magic that comprise the brand's essence. Most brands do have something great about them if you look hard enough for it. It may not be how the brand is right now. It may be how it once was or what those who know the brand just feel it could become. Ask loyal users. They often have surprisingly rich language to describe what they think is great about that particular brand. Clues to the brand's best self may also be found in its heritage, its consumption rituals, its visual identity or its communications history. Bear in mind, however, that brands exist in context: if the brand's greatest hour was in 1964, what made it great back then has to be reinterpreted for the contemporary world.

When a brand finds a resonant cultural tension that it, and only it, can address, then the foundations of a big ideaL are in place. As long, of course, as it can be captured concisely and delivered genuinely, can excite various groups of people, and get noticed and inspire creative thinking.

Did we say it was easy?

*What's  
The big ideaL?*

## big ideaLs and marketing



Although all positionings are not big ideaLs, a strong big ideaL is a type of positioning. It is emotional rather than functional and can provide guidance for communications and other brand activities. Think of it as a brand platform that evolves as the cultural context changes around it.

While a positioning can be based on a purely functional benefit, a big ideaL articulates a worldview or purpose supported by the functional aspects of the brand. A big ideaL encapsulates the belief system driving everything that a brand does. Such shared belief helps it to attract widespread emotional support and provides the drive for behavioral change among consumers. Emotions, as studies have consistently shown, play a big

part in purchase decisions. While this varies somewhat by market, even in more apparently rational markets, emotions very often govern purchase decisions, and big ideaLs are excellent attractors of emotional support.

Emotional connection with a brand improves its chances of making a cultural impact. In a world where what is said about brands comes under the control of the world at large rather than brand owners, cultural impact increases the efficiency of marketing spend. After all, it gives people a reason to think about a brand when they would probably rather think about basketball or desserts.

The big ideaL also pays dividends in the practical business of producing marketing communications as well as other brand-building and sales-building initiatives. Brand owners and their agencies need to get the best, most consistent work out of people with varying marketing skills across multiple organizations. If individuals are directed too tightly or insensitively, they will not provide their most inspired thinking, but if an organization has no direction, its brand will appear fragmented to consumers. In the simpler marketing communications environment of the past, advertising ideas were taken down into different channels. Nowadays that phrase feels patronizing, is very vulnerable to the 'Not Invented Here' syndrome, and ignores the distinct needs of interactive marketing channels. Even if a useful brand communications direction begins with a great advertising idea, it still needs to be shared with the extended marketing team as a brand concept, not an advertising one. And, as Nike has demonstrated with LiveStrong, a powerful brand direction may emerge from other places.

*“If individuals are directed too tightly or insensitively, they will not provide their most inspired thinking, but if an organization has no direction, its brand will appear fragmented to consumers.”*

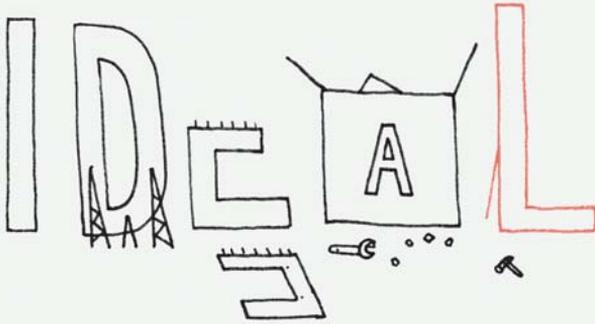
*What's  
The big ideaL?*

A well-defined big ideaL can take the central place once occupied by the grand advertising concept. It gives people an inspiring general direction while still allowing them the freedom to employ their creativity for the benefit of the brand. The best specialists in any discipline have their own ideas that need to be encouraged, not suppressed. A big ideaL can provide a growing medium for all sorts of great ideas, of many shapes and sizes, over time.

The same applies in a geographical sense. Client and agency teams work globally, and nowadays a marketing team on a global brand – or their agency partners – will often comprise a multi-cultural group who will want to draw on the best creative resources they can find anywhere in the world. Having a global big ideaL, with the potential for local interpretation, is a good way of striking the right balance between flexibility and rigor.

Many theories of marketing have little impact on the way brands are actually marketed for the simple reason that they are ignored or rejected by the creative people who design the activities brands spend their money on. The big ideaL avoids this trap since creative people are intimately involved with the concept from its inception.

*What's The big ideaL?*



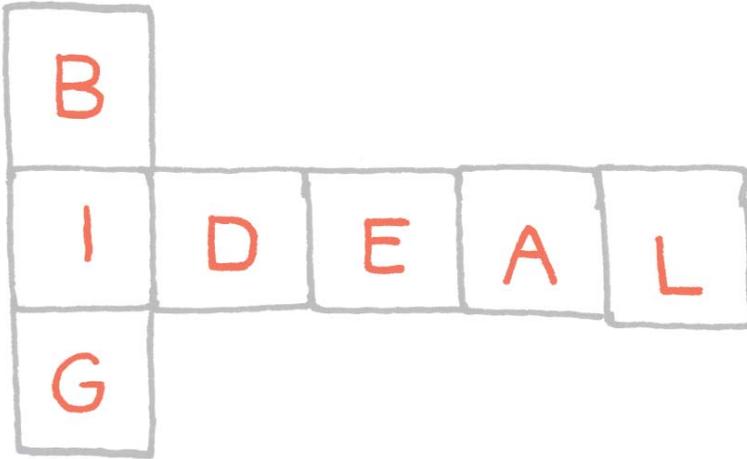
# *Developing a big idea*

## The big ideaL workshop

### *Developing a big ideaL*

The big ideaL should underpin all aspects of a brand's communications and behavior. It needs to be developed with care. While it's easy to write one, it's awfully hard to write the right one. If done right, it will be adopted deeply within the organization, and it needs to be developed with a high degree of collaboration from all layers. Senior people need to be involved as well as some stakeholders beyond the marketing team. A workshop approach gets a diverse group working together to develop powerful big ideaLs, but an effective workshop depends on considerable preparation, not just a sharp sort who wields a mean Sharpie or a wicked Post-it on the day (or two) in question.

A penetrating understanding of the brand's best self within a cultural context will beat at the heart of a strong big ideaL. Therefore, a good big ideaL workshop involves external cultural commentators who can stimulate the team to think about potential societal tensions and themes beyond day-to-day marketing concerns. Academics, writers, cartoonists, entrepreneurs, journalists, and others can be invaluable additions, depending on the particular brand being considered. In addition to the pre-work by the participants and the agency team, there ought to be consumer research and stakeholder interviewing, but the ultimate goal for the workshop will be drawing on the expertise that already exists within the organization.



For Scrabble, the world would be a better place if we rediscovered the magic of words.

Scrabble is a word game, but words are threatened. In many parts of the world, including France, where this big ideaL first found expression, teen vocabularies are considerably smaller than they were twenty years ago. The brand has a legitimate right to oppose this and celebrate the power of words in a fun way.

Sometimes, of course, big ideaLs simply emerge naturally in the course of developing strategy and work, and provide a useful way of articulating a particular direction, as happened in the case of Scrabble. But just because a big ideaL can emerge organically doesn't take away the need for it to be based on a really solid understanding.

## Finding cultural tensions

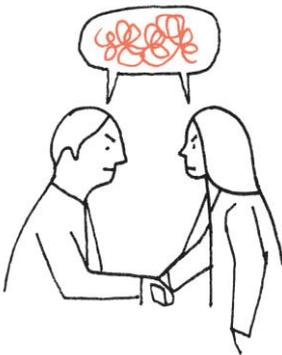
*Developing  
a big idea*

Because rich and insightful discoveries come from different places, the quest for a powerful point of cultural tension should cover various sources – books, articles, consumer media, blogs, trend sources, art, music, and scholarship. The killer touch might be to interview (or invite to the workshop) an expert such as an anthropologist, social psychologist, or someone from a similar discipline. The investigation should be a piece of cultural detective work that is stimulating in its own right.

A cultural tension is not the same as a trend. Brands frequently try to jump on trends, but they risk being too late (often), or too early (sometimes), or jumping on a fad instead of a trend (foolishly), or being wonderfully in tune with a trend that only affects about two hundred people (acceptably, but only if you sell luxury yachts).

Nonetheless, the study of trends is important in finding big ideaLs, because cultural tensions can result when two trends collide, or when a trend results in tensions and potential counter-reactions. Think, for example, of the tensions created in many men and women by shifting expectations of gender roles, or how trends in parental responsibility have caused massive dilemmas about acceptable degrees of tree-climbing and messing around on bikes.

At the workshop itself, there will be heated and occasionally violent debate about what the most relevant cultural tension is and which new ones may emerge. Consequently, good preparation is the secret to good discussion – and personal safety – in the workshop.



The Red Papers:

Getting to the brand's best self

*Developing  
a big ideaL*



To use a phrase made famous by Robin Wight of the agency WCRS, a brand should be interrogated until it confesses its strengths. But it's funny how often brand teams, even after years of discussion, fail to be in complete agreement about what is the defining strength of a brand; what is the one thing that truly makes it unique and great. The big ideaL workshop is an opportunity to look at the brand's potential strengths in fresh ways. A robust discussion will lead to the best collective understanding, if not complete consensus, of the essence of the brand's greatness. Even after years of exhaustive research, unexpected places can unearth penetrating insights about even well-established brands. Take the agency planner who shed new light on a well-known brand by going to eBay and buying up old copies of *Life* that had referred to the brand in question.

The brand team probably has squirreled away unique intuitive understanding of the brand, but it may be buried under a rational and highly objective facade. In the workshop, members of the brand team need to be challenged to explore their more emotional and subjective understanding. That can lead to sharply different conclusions from what they may initially present.

The brand's best self is unlikely to be identical to its current self. As with cultural tensions, it makes sense to look at the brand from a variety of angles, becoming experts on its history, the "archaeology" of its packaging and advertising (maybe with the help of semiotics), its partners, its place in the media and popular culture, and, of course, its consumers. Loyal consumers are particularly valuable because they have the deepest relationships with the brand. The big ideaL workshop uses a refreshed version of a classic technique – the brand audit – to unlock their insights.

## What makes a big ideaL workshop work?

### *Simplicity*

#### *Developing a big ideaL*

In a complex world, one of the most attractive things about The big ideaL is its simplicity. This is carried through to the workshop format. There are only two main sections to navigate: brand's best self and the cultural tension in which it finds itself. A big ideaL workshop keeps jargon to a minimum and uses real language, just as a good big ideaL should be something you could tell your best friend about without him or her saying you're full of marketing bull. You do have a friend who's not in marketing, don't you?

### *Shared vision*

The big ideaL works by giving brands a worldview that is inclusive and brings people together. A big ideaL workshop does the same by involving all participants in a spirit of sharing, discovery, and contribution to an ideaL that is bigger than any one person.

### *High energy*

Step away from the PowerPoint, or at least give it some air. A big ideaL workshop should not be an endurance event. Think stimulation and dialogue, not templates and transitions.

### *Preparation*

It may sound schoolmasterly, but good preparation is the secret to a successful workshop. The cultural tensions and the brand's best self need to be thoroughly thought out and researched in advance. It is in the nature of most client-agency relationships that the brand's best self tends to get more headspace than cultural tension. Naturally, start with the latter.

### *The right people in the right frame of mind*

Since it is important to have senior people there and off-BlackBerry, the casting needs careful selection and briefing. It helps to have some other people involved who are not part of the day-to-day brand team but are good with ideas and quick to grasp brand and consumer issues. Consider inviting a product designer, a brand manager from another category, a member of the sales team, or any other sharp outsider whose insights will be valuable.

### *Patience*

There will come a point in the workshop where it feels like you're getting nowhere. More often than not, this is the gathering moment just before you *do* get somewhere interesting. Good workshops take the group into new places. Some of them will be sidetracks or dead ends, but you have to follow a few of them to find the path to someplace new and good. Divide The big ideaL workshop into three main chunks: the cultural tension(s), the brand's best self, and the formulation of potential big ideaLs. Ideally, the workshop will run over a day and a half.

## The nitty-gritty

### *Developing a big ideaL*

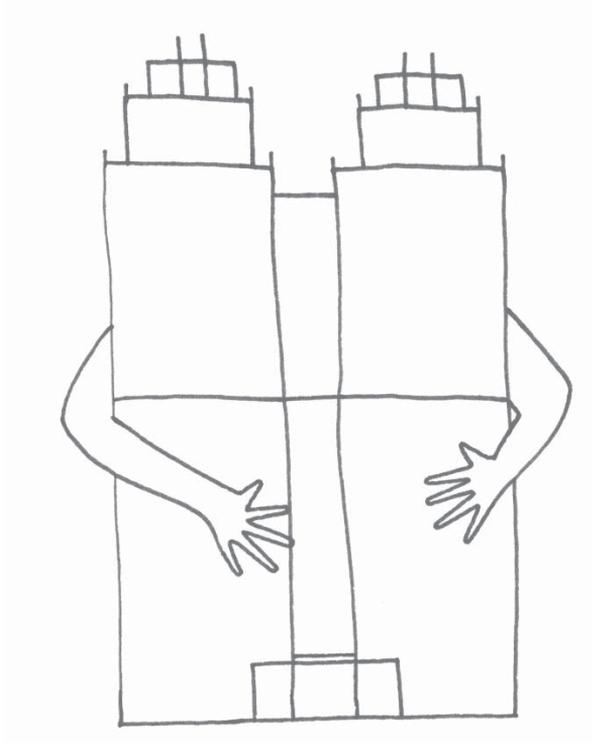
This isn't simply an excuse for a nice dinner but is genuinely necessary. Trying to do everything in a day feels like a rush for something so important, and an extra half or full day allows for some incubation time for the rich stimulus of the first day.

The workshop will likely produce rough wordings and territories for one or more big ideaLs rather than beautifully written finished articles. A sentence designed by committee is likely to be an ugly, misshapen thing. The intense, inclusive style of the workshop is best complemented by a subsequent period in which a small team agrees on a precise wording and lives with it for a while before bringing it back to the group. Don't get stuck "wordsmithing" in the workshop.

A big ideaL has to do all the things that a good positioning would, and a bit more besides. Once it is complete, you'll need to go through an evaluation process to make sure The big ideaL you've birthed is powerful, differentiated, authentic, and resonant. The questions we ask include:

- Can the brand or company genuinely live up to its big ideaL?
- Will it get noticed? Sometimes it may need to be quite unexpected, as was IBM's championing of e-business in the early days of the Internet.
- Does it excite you? That is the key. If it doesn't excite you, then it is unlikely to excite a wider group. The big ideaL lives to be shared transparently with anyone associated with the brand or company. It is a defensible goal, not a secretive piece of marketing trickery. It needs to be memorable and exciting. If not, then start again.

Shangri-La's big ideaL has been expressed in ways that owe very little to conventional hotel chain campaigns.



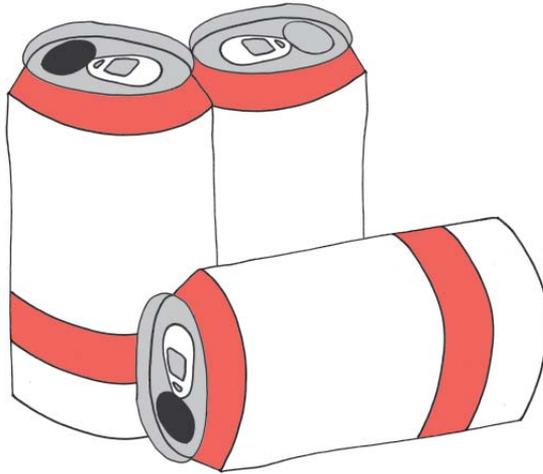
## The nobility, or otherwise, of big ideaLs

### *Developing a big ideaL*

The big ideaL is a widely useful concept that many brands can use, at the very least, to enhance their thinking. Not all brands have the personality, goals, or fashion sense of a Mother Teresa or Bono, but it's still worth considering what their big ideaL would be. The Miller High Life brand was revived in the United States by opposing the decline of American manhood in a way that was neither politically correct nor universally appealing. But it projected a powerful worldview that was compelling to many people who enjoyed quaffing a frosty one. (Ogilvy was not responsible for the campaign, but it contained an implicit big ideaL – a belief that the USA would be a better place if men could be men again.) Fanta discovered that their big ideaL is fun and subversive, yet with a grain of genuine idealism at its core. A big ideaL should not be entirely frivolous, but it can certainly embrace humor. Not every brand can hope to achieve world peace, and while you may have wanted that from Coke, you'd likely flee from a similar approach from your credit card. It would be a pity if all brands shared the same goal – because they would all end up looking similar – but a brand's big ideaL should be at least a little uplifting.

The big ideaL should not be confused with a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) program. The big ideaL is there to help a brand define an interesting and attractive worldview that will help it gather widespread support (internally and externally), but this is not quite the same. Although brands ignore CSR at their peril, most brands do not exist because of their CSR program. They exist because they play a functional

and emotional role in the world. They provide benefits that draw people to them. The big ideaL ensures that a brand's role in the world, particularly its emotional benefit, is clear and motivating. It goes to the root of why the brand exists, and while it is helpful to align this to the brand's CSR strategy, it is not the same thing.



Not all big ideaLs should be expressed in an entirely serious or “worthy” way. An attractive point of view is not always a serious one, and it's important that The big ideaL be true to the spirit of the brand (partly to ensure differentiation). There are, in fact, some genuine reasons why play is very necessary to both young people and adults, but Fanta's big ideaL is pleasantly subversive in opposing too much grown-upness.

Necessary additions to The big ideaL

*Developing  
a big ideaL*

The big ideaL will not answer every problem, not even most of them. You cannot use it as an algorithm that outputs a creative brief, a creative idea, a channel plan, or an answer to the question of whether the brand's spokesdog should be a Labrador or a Bullmastiff. It won't tell you how much product information you need to include in a particular campaign, who the target audience should be, or whether to show the 250ml bottle or the family pack. All these decisions form part of the detailed planning of a brand's marketing and communications activities, and The big ideaL does not replace them. Nor will it replace the following crucial steps:

- **A definition of the brand's voice, look, and feel.** While The big ideaL will define what a brand stands for, it will not articulate in detail how it feels when you encounter it. These feelings should complement The big ideaL, enrich it, give it texture and dimension. How a brand feels is often more important than what it says, and getting this right is an incredibly important exercise. We do believe, though, that starting with a strong big ideaL often makes such exercises a lot easier.
- **Product focus.** You do not need to promulgate The big ideaL with every communication, not even with most of them. If your brand has incorporated a truly groundbreaking new ingredient, for example, then you might be well advised to focus solely on that. Product messages need clear communication and, in many markets with high innovation, there will be many of them. big ideaLs have an appeal that goes beyond the functional – and there is much evidence for the commercial power of emotion – but they still need to complement whatever functional information a brand needs to impart. Ultimately, people buy products so The big ideaL and the purchase experience need to be mutually supportive, not mutually contradictory.
- **Ideas.** The big ideaL is about sparking ideas, not replacing them. We need more ideas than ever before, in all shapes and sizes. And they don't need to feel like matching luggage. Take full advantage of the distinct opportunities offered by any particular contact point. A good big ideaL should stimulate, as well as guide, the creativity of the many people who come up with ideas, whatever part of the marketing landscape they inhabit.
- **Hard work.** Building powerful brands and doing great, effective work for them is the result of a thousand small decisions rather than a single big one. Execution is not some nice glossy add-on. The people you are talking to won't bother to uncover the rather clever idea at the heart of a tawdry piece of execution. They'll be long gone. And because great execution takes a lot of time and effort, what we learn from the crafting process will sometimes help us evolve a big ideaL in a better way. It might seem messy, but that's just how it happens sometimes.

# *Conclusion*



It's a pretty messy time for global business just now. Economic shock, global competition, reduced headcounts, data overload, environmental challenges, onerous governance, and elusive but highly demanding consumers are causing uncertainty and stress. There's not much of a comfort zone any more. We need precise navigation, and we need it fast. We need direction but with flexibility. We need to deal with vast complexity while still collaborating across functions and cultures like never before. If we're not careful we get tossed around on the waves until we get waterlogged and sink, although if we get it right we can have an enthralling ride. big ideaLs can help us. They can help us know what we're about whether we run a huge corporation or a small brand. They can help us generate enthusiasm, commitment, creativity, and profit. They can help us deal with the big challenges in front of us, and the even bigger ones lurking just around the corner.

## *Postscript – the Ogilvy big ideaL*

It wouldn't really have been fair of us to advocate the big ideaL for our clients if we hadn't developed our own, so we did. The Ogilvy big ideaL is:

“Ogilvy believes the world would be a better place if we could bring out the inner greatness in brands, companies, and people.”

The “cultural tension” at the heart of Ogilvy's big ideaL is the challenge so many companies are facing: how to be true and authentic. Consumers, stakeholders, and employees clearly want that.

But it can be hard to project authenticity in an environment that is complex, splintered, and changing all the time. When we talked to people about what made Ogilvy strong and different at its best, we found that they often mentioned the company's appetite for, and ability to solve, difficult problems. Our skill in penetrating to what really mattered in a brand or company and to express it in a fresh way was mentioned. And while this led us to much of our big ideaL, the importance of people (employees, clients, consumers) in this process is paramount. David Ogilvy believed in individual talent, and the agency that bears his name does too. We have our own big ideaL. We feel good about it, and it reminds us succinctly why we come to work each day.

## *Key takeaways*

- The brands we most admire have underpinning ideals at their cores. Not just big ideas, but big ideaLs.
- Ideals have played an important part in the history of business, and their time has come again.
- A big ideaL generally gets most traction if it can be captured in a simple but rich phrase.
- There is strong quantitative evidence that having a big ideaL is correlated with business success.



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## *About the authors*

Colin Mitchell

*Joint Worldwide Planning Director, Ogilvy & Mather*

Colin grew up in Scotland and started his advertising career as an apprentice account planner for BMP DDB in London, carrying enormous portfolios on trains to research groups in strange towns.

In 1996, he came to New York and worked for Cliff Freeman & Partners through the dot com years, working on the Cannes-winning Outpost.com and Budget Car Rental campaigns.

In 1999 he joined Ogilvy as the planner on the IBM eBusiness campaign. Since then, he has worked on the BP “Beyond Petroleum” campaign and Cisco’s “Welcome to the Human Network,” among others.

His article “Selling the Brand Inside” appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*. He has contributed a chapter to the book, *Brand New Brand Thinking*, and has written about the future of marketing for *The Wall Street Journal*. He blogs at TheDoubleThink.com about the meeting of planning and analytics with Dimitri Maex, the MD of Ogilvy Consulting.

Colin sits on the board of the Advertising Education Foundation and the Advertising Research Foundation. He was a David Rockefeller Fellow for the Partnership for New York City.

In 2009 Colin was made Joint Worldwide Planning Director with John Shaw, appointed to the Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide Board of Directors.

He is married with two sons and a daughter and lives in New York City.

John Shaw

*Joint Worldwide Planning Director, Ogilvy & Mather*

John is a well-travelled planner, originally from Scotland, who, along with Colin Mitchell, is responsible for the planning function at Ogilvy. This numbers approximately 400 people around the world, responsible for generating the insights, strategy, and ideas that inspire great campaigns.

John read history at Oxford, almost all of which he has forgotten. He started his career at the AC Nielsen Company before spending three years at JWT London where he was trained as a planner. After some time on the client side with Mars, he started one of the first planning departments in a direct marketing agency at Evans Hunt Scott. He then worked with the Y&R Group for several years.

Early in 1996 John moved to Portland, Oregon as the global planning director on Microsoft at Wieden + Kennedy. Over the next seven years he worked on most of the agency's major clients such as Nike and Coca-Cola, and had a spell in the London office.

Just as SARS was breaking in 2003, John joined Ogilvy, first in Hong Kong, from where he travelled all over Asia Pacific running a large regional planning group, as well as winning business from clients such as Disney, Coca-Cola, and Johnson & Johnson. In 2006 he returned to London to lead the regional planning community in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Over the past four years he has played a major part in developing Ogilvy's "big ideaL" philosophy.

In 2009 he assumed joint responsibility for planning worldwide and joined the Ogilvy Worldwide Board and Worldwide Creative Council.

John is a runner, golfer, and wine drinker to varying degrees of competitiveness. He is married with two daughters and a feisty and equally well-travelled Staffordshire bull terrier.

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