

Designing the Dixons Carrier Bag

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Education Business Partnerships have a great deal of potential for success. However, it often involves students working on artificial tasks where the outcome is somehow lost between the needs of the school and the needs of the participating business. Can schools really do meaningful work for business? Will the business actually respond to the proposals suggested by young people? There is a great number of well documented examples of partnerships which have worked to the benefit of both parties. What is not clear is the number of attempts which, for one reason or another, do not meet the expectations of either, or both, parties.

This was not the case with a recent project undertaken by 24 Year 10 Design Communication students at Bradford City Technology College. This group was commissioned by Dixons, the High Street electrical store who are major sponsors of the CTC, to generate a new carrier bag design.

The carrier bag design project began in May 1992 when Dixons suggested the challenge following a debate over the design of their current bag. It was then left on the back boiler for several months until the task could be taken on as a natural and appropriate project within the curriculum. This is a very real problem with this type of work. Making sure that the timing is right for both parties is one of the key issues for success. A sustainable Education Business Partnership with Dixons has been made possible by the formation of a Liaison Group which consists of a team of senior personnel from both the College and Dixons, who have come together to create a positive and dynamic working relationship. The focus is to develop the partnership in areas which can be mutually beneficial and, as such, is seen as generating a new connection between the commercial/industrial culture and the education culture. It was eventually decided that the project would be a suitable context for teaching aspects of free-hand and computer aided design to students on the GCSE Design Communication course.

The group were asked to investigate who they believed were Dixons' main type of customer. This information was expected to influence their ideas for the new carrier bag design. The results suggested that Dixons' main customers were young to middle aged males and that the stores themselves represented aggressive male images.

For two hours a week throughout the eight week term the students worked at developing their proposals. Dixons provided a very specific brief to work to and were involved at various stages of the development. One of the other main issues for success, apart from timing, is to provide a simple, clear brief, or specification, which is a result of a common understanding of what students will be required to do. The tasks need to be real — or at least appear that way to the students. There needs to be high expectations but outcomes do need to be achievable.

Mr Philip Harrison, the Brand Director from Dixons, visited the College to talk to the students about how Dixons classified their main customer types. It was interesting to note how accurate the students had been in assessing the customer types. Philip presented rather more sophisticated data with each stereotyped group labelled with titles such as 'Techies', 'Impulsive', 'Aspiring', etc. Each group was described in some detail with regard to their potential to purchase from the store. It was presented as a series of OHP transparencies, complete with cartoon characters, which helped students understand the complexities of the material. This market research information is used, amongst other things, to influence the internal layout of Dixons stores. It also helped the students to understand how Dixons fit into the High Street and how they target their share of the potential market. This information allowed the students to evaluate the suitability of their initial ideas and develop their final proposals.

Philip's very high quality input at this stage was vitally important. Any input from Business needs to be of a high quality. This can represent a big problem for people who are not used to talking to youngsters. Presentation needs to be well prepared and pitched at a level which the students can easily understand, but, without talking down to them.

Over the next few weeks the group generated over 300 different ideas. They had begun by working on layout paper, using a reduced photocopy image of the current bag design as an underlay to assist with the first ideas, the brief had suggested, to the students, that Dixons were reluctant to accept a dramatic change to the existing design. The underlay helped them to analyse the design visually and to explore quickly varying arrangements.

From these initial drawings, the students moved on to computers to develop their ideas further. The College runs a large network of PCs and Corel Draw software was used. The Dixons registered name (colour and font) was installed on to a common drive so students could simply import this into their bag designs on each of the individual computers. This proved extremely useful for the lower ability students who were able to produce high quality images.

The students presented their proposals to staff involved in the teaching associated with the project, together with a key member of the Liaison Group. It was clear that many students had produced a great deal of their work outside the sixteen hours of lesson time which had been made available to them. Indeed, as one performance indicator of the success of the project it is worth noting that about twenty of the students accepted the offer of additional assistance during the holiday and spent at least one day in College. Many lunchtimes and after school sessions were also used to allow access to the appropriate equipment.

The design proposals were presented as a mixture of free-hand drawings, coloured computer printouts and prototype bags. It was the latter which was felt to be the most impressive part of the work although, in reality, they were easy to produce from the computer graphics. Using a Roland Camm 2 plotter cutter and self-adhesive vinyl, many of the designs were able to be produced and stuck on to plain ready made carrier bags. The advantage of this method of modelling is that the designs can be fully evaluated. It was possible to explore potential problems with production, as designs which cannot be reproduced on the plotter cutter suggest future difficulties with printing. The bags could be filled and the designs viewed when they are distorted in use. Finally, the visual impact of a proposal produced in this way is very impressive indeed. The first student to produce a prototype provided an added stimulus to the rest of the group to follow.

Unbeknown to the College at that time, Dixons had abandoned the idea of briefing a design consultancy to come up with a new design. From what they had seen of the initial ideas, the Brand Marketing Department had decided that the students' proposals were likely to provide a selection of suitable designs.

Staff had been asked to select the best ten designs to show to the Brand Marketing Department but found this too difficult as they were influenced by the effort the students had put into the work as well as the final result. In the end, they took every prototype bag which had been modelled, together with a short video of the student presentations.

It had been the intention of the meeting with Dixons that they shortlist three designs for final selection. They found this almost as difficult as the teachers had done to try to shortlist ten designs. In the end, five students were invited to present their proposals to the marketing team: Humaira Mahmood, Reena Chauhan, Pinky Patel, Stacy Buckley, Rizwan Ayub.

Students individually presented their proposals to the Marketing Department and they, in turn, selected the most suitable idea. Dixons said how extremely impressed they were with the proposals, not only with the quality and quantity of ideas which had been produced but also because all of the prototypes had been suitable for the intended method of production. This is in direct comparison with many of the designs they have had presented, in the past, by commercial designers.

Finally, Stacy Buckley's proposal was accepted and it is intended that, with some minor changes, it will go to print within the next weeks. Dixons currently have bags produced by the tens of millions so it is very likely that Stacy's design will be seen by quite a few people!

The students were invited to look around Dixons' own design studio where they found the methods used, manual and computer aided, were identical, in principle, to those used back at College. They were also taken, by Philip Harrison and a colleague, down to the Ealing branches of Dixons and their sister company, Currys for a behind the scenes look at how the stores operate and how the market research is put into practice on the shop floor.

Each of the finalists received very generous amounts of Dixons vouchers ranging from £150 to £20 each, together with framed certificates. In addition, the College was asked to select goods to the value of £500 from Dixons store. Two cameras together, with a TV and video player were chosen for use within the D&T Department. These rewards were never discussed as part of the project and came

as a complete surprise to all concerned. The students have also been invited to see the bags being produced, at a factory in the Midlands, once production begins.

Apart from the material gains, and indeed the prestige of 18,000,000 bags being produced, with an acknowledgement to the designer and College printed on them, it is worth reflecting upon the educational successes of the project. The late David Jones MBE, who was the D&T Inspector for Bradford LEA, used to say that projects must provide 'the maximum opportunity for students to succeed'. He would also say that teachers should encourage 'simple work of a high order'. In both cases it is felt that the criterion has been met with this project. The issues mentioned previously had been addressed and appropriate materials and resources had been provided by the College. Deadlines were short, which added a touch of real life pressure to the work. It is also important that the Business involved in the partnership is able and prepared to offer full evaluations of the work. Whilst this offers potential for difficulties (after all, 23 students' work was rejected) Dixons managed this through the three stages of: general feedback during Philip Harrison's visit, shortlisting and final selection. At each stage, the students were offered constructive criticism and positive advice.

At the end of the day, it is clear that if the issues mentioned are all addressed then schools have a great deal which they can offer to Business and Industry. They can provide fresh new ideas which reflect a young persons' perspective and enthusiasm. If adequately resourced, they can offer a level of professionalism which matches that of the commercial world. If this project is an indicator, Business can provide a context which is very much a part of the current Technology Orders. This project has provided a context which has allowed a great deal of learning to take place. Indeed, the staff involved regard it as one of the most successful pieces of work they have been involved with. It seems a pity that if it were assessed using the new Technology proposals, which were under discussion at the time of the project, then very few statements could be met.

From Dixons' perspective, it is clear that the CTC students have changed the companies' perceptions. The chosen bag design is a radical change for Dixons. It represents a marketing image which is arguably less aggressive and male dominated than their current design. After all, it was a proposal from a young female designer.

