

Wally Olins

Viewpoints

Business Profile:

The big name in the names game
still has designs

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Andrew Cave walks across the stripped floors and under the loft-style architecture to meet Wally Olins

IMAGE is everything to Wally Olins, the makeover master who helped transform British Telecom into BT and Guinness into Diageo. Except, that is, when it comes to himself.

"I have not consciously branded myself at all," he admits. "It is true that I wear a bow tie and funny spectacles but it is not conscious branding. I am what I am. I am outspoken and abrasive. I can be difficult. It is what I am like. I do not try to cultivate it but I do not hide it either. I tell people what I think and I do not mince anything. It is what people pay for."

It is an odd thing to say. Olins, 70, is after all a guru in the dynamic world of branding consultancy where nothing is ever left to chance. He is credited with branding or rebranding everything from mobile phones group Orange to [Britain itself](#), and his skill persuaded US advertising giant Omnicom to shell out £30m to buy his Wolff Olins consultancy.



Image-master Wally Olins, with trademark dicky bow and thick-rimmed glasses

His canalside offices near King's Cross are certainly branded - stripped floors, loft-style architecture and cubicles that are anonymous because Olins hates "external signs of hierarchy".

The designers are pretty styled too, mostly tall, thin types with glasses and wearing trendy clothes, as does Olins himself, with dazzling green check shirt, trademark dicky bow and thick-rimmed glasses that intensify his alert, lean features.

He will not reveal how much money he is making from selling Wolff Olins, which was founded with partner Michael Wolff in 1965 and has been owned by a management team since 1997. In his heart, Olins is a "little sad" but do not mention the word retirement.

"I will not retire until I fall off the perch," he snaps. "I am leaving because you cannot have an old geezer hanging around the place but I do not do retirement. I am visiting professor at a few universities and have some private clients. I write books. I think I have other things but I cannot remember what they are."

Olins, awarded a CBE in 1999, has reincarnated British Telecom, Prudential and Renault and there are plenty of hapless companies in need of a new image. "There are a lot of challenging jobs," he admits.

"I think General Motors is the biggest. They have admitted that the Oldsmobile brand was empty and could not compete. They need a complete reorganisation. The Cadillac brand has evaporated; Vauxhall and Opel are both stale. They have not got any brands at all.

"Then if you look at the new media, they are very difficult to brand. I do not know if NTL, which is spending a lot of money, has made any impact with customers at all.

"The biggest one is the European Union. Like it or not, it exists but for most people it has absolutely no meaning at all. They have not managed to create an idea of the EU that people can understand, that people can be sympathetic towards. Most people feel the EU is just something we have to have. There is no European patriotism; no European idea, nothing. It is such an enormous challenge that no one has attempted to do it. I would love to have a go."

Gosh, he'll never retire at this rate. How on earth would he rebrand Europe? "Diversity. Europe is the most extraordinary place. There is a whole series of things. As Mel Brooks said: 'I love Europe so much I always keep a picture of it in my wallet.' What is it? What the hell is going on here?"

It is a far cry from Olins' humble beginnings as the son of a road haulage operator - a sort of pre-war Eddie Stobart - whose Jewish ancestors fled from Russian pogroms to Britain in the 1880s. He went to Highgate School, studied history at St Peter's College, Oxford, then wound up in an advertising job in Bombay where he "began to realise that organisations have a personality, a definite identity".

He met architect and graphic designer Wolff and set up a branding consultancy that "was very much at the fringes, a bit like vegetarianism. The clients were always in some kind of crisis and the advertising industry treated us with a mixture of disdain and incomprehension."

The client list expanded from Hadfield Paints, the first customer, to British Oxygen, motorcycles firm Norton, Bovis Construction and shipping giant P&O. In 1983, Wolff Olins metamorphosed the dusty old Industrial & Commercial Finance Corporation into 3i and the work came rolling in.

It changed British Telecom into BT, invented the Orange name for a fledgling mobile phone company and caused huge controversy by [swapping trusty Guinness for meaningless Diageo](#). Olins was not personally responsible for the Diageo name but he insists it is a success.

"The idea was to make employees understand the business they were in. It was to make people understand that the business they were in can supply small individual pleasures all over the world every day.

"It seems quite sensible, whether you like it or not. You might call your son Claude or Horace. You might think it is a great name. I might think it is a stupid name. But after a while he is dear old Claude and you would not think of calling him anything else. Take Volkswagen. Its name is unpronounceable in most countries and it derives from the Third Reich. If you were starting again, you would not use that name."

There have been "hundreds" of disasters, he says, before naming just one: the Midland Bank's attempts to develop brands, such as Orchard for older people and Credo for yuppies, in the 1980s.

"We launched all four brands at the same time. The problem was it was logistically very difficult to do this. People could not understand what we were talking about. When a customer walked into the bank and asked about Credo, there was nothing to tell them, nothing to take, no brochures, no information."

He is more forthcoming on other peoples' blunders. "With hindsight it is very easy to say that British Airways was wrong with its tailfin rebranding. At the time it was clear that what they were thinking through was very intelligent. They were trying to say 'we are no longer an airline which caters exclusively for British travellers.' The mistake was that they adopted a whole series of other identities from other ethnic groups, from other groups of people.

"Another huge mistake is what was done with DaimlerChrysler. You cannot pretend you are a merger of equals when you are not. You cannot ignore brands you have got like Mercedes and Chrysler and lose them in a ragbag. The Jeep is a monster. The Mercedes is the apotheosis of Teutonic pride. You have to have separate organisations. It was a terrible mistake."

Olins says he wouldn't work for a political party or the tobacco industry. He shudders when I mention the business of rebranding celebrities like former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, but then cheers up: "I am open to offers. We will see. I can do what I want to do."

At the moment, that involves playing golf, walking his labrador Poppy, reading a "huge amount of history" and spending time with his three grown-up children, a 14-year-old child from his second marriage and three grandchildren.

With a house in Goring, Berkshire, and a flat in Marylebone, it seems an idyllic, er, retirement, but there is a burning restlessness that emerges when Olins asks why I haven't questioned whether he thinks he is successful.

So does he? The makeover master pauses; his brow deeply furrowed. "I find it very hard to answer. The answer for me is I do not know whether I am successful or not. I suppose I am."