



# Want to feel brand new?

How could nursing improve its public image? **Colin Parish** asks marketing experts for their ideas on rebranding the profession

JUDGING BY recent negative press coverage, nursing's image could benefit from a makeover. While the profession is generally well regarded by the public, nurses believe many of its prevailing stereotypes are outdated. An improved public image could boost staff morale, enhance the work they are doing and entice others to pursue a career in nursing or return to practice.

But what should that image be? Our MORI poll, published last week, shows that the public recognises the hard work and dedication of nurses, and sees them as trustworthy and professional. But the public does not afford nurses the same status as doctors or fully understand the wide range of activities and responsibilities required by modern nursing.

The British Brands Group is an organisation that promotes the interests of brands to the public, to governments and to others who make policy and take decisions. It says customers develop special relationships with brands they love: they are loyal to them and feel they can be relied on because they will meet or exceed their expectations. Even everyday items that have a specific brand have unique attributes that mean people get emotionally attached to them.

So could nursing benefit from being re-branded? We asked experts in marketing, public relations and branding what was wrong with nursing as a 'brand'. Then we asked how they would change the brand to attract more people into the profession, to boost nurses' morale and their public standing. Despite not having done the kind of research they would usually undertake, they came up with some interesting ideas.

Charlie Robertson, founding partner at international branding strategy consultants Red Spider, says that in many ways nursing has an enviable image. 'Nurses are held in high esteem. By and large everyone loves, admires and trusts nurses. That equals brand perfection. Nurses are people you can talk to, as opposed to doctors, who are the folk you are supposed to listen to.' ►





**Top: the army and the police have made concerted efforts to improve the quality and quantity of the people applying to enter those professions**

**Opposite below: *Bob the Builder* has helped boost the image of builders**



Press Association/Alamy

**‘With any brand, if the reality is not positive with consumers there is nothing you can do apart from changing the reality, otherwise it’s like putting lipstick on a pig’**



But Mr Robertson describes the recent negative media coverage as ‘pretty dispiriting’. His company has worked with hundreds of brands over the years, helping organisations look at what they already know about themselves from a different perspective. He says his aim is always to inspire teams and unite them behind a common cause.

### Compassion and intimacy

His approach to nursing would be to base a new brand on nursing’s core values. ‘What are the key core values now and what are the desired ones for the future? Nursing is a public service in a “caring industry”. We would need to define the context and compare nurses to others in the field. Are there other people the public could go to? We need to work out nursing’s comparative position with these other groups. And then we would write a manifesto for the future of nursing. Nursing as a brand is driven by caring, compassion and dedication. The values of nursing – compassion and intimacy – are likely to be more valuable than the Florence Nightingale image.’

Mr Robertson says such a campaign would have to be modified to reach different target audiences. ‘We want to influence the people in power so they will treat nursing with greater respect, understanding and value. If the current perception of nurses is of “bedpan skivvies”, we would want to educate the public on how nurses are highly educated, to gain more respect and to engender pride in nurses themselves.’

He says nurses could help their cause by being more forthright about what they do. He says nurses should ‘stand proud and loud and be more assertive,’ and that nurses would be one of the campaign’s most important audiences.

Sue Imgrund, a Red Spider consultant, says it is important to remember that nursing is a service brand. ‘The people in service companies are the brand. The

problem is that almost no other profession has an image so out of odds with the reality. Nursing and nurses conjure up images of *Carry On* films and the stereotype of the battleaxe sister, sexy female nurse and the gay male nurse.

‘But maybe the very fact that we are so fascinated by nurses really points to a deep need in us all – in a society that values independence above all – to be “looked after” by someone. Maybe this can be a part of the solution. To reposition nurses not as skivvies and servants, but as “coaches in humanity” or “practical psychologists”,’ says Ms Imgrund.

Ms Imgrund’s solution would be to create a manifesto for nurses and promote it using films, books and TV, rather than traditional advertising. She says films such as *Dead Poet’s Society* encouraged lots of young people to consider a career in teaching. ‘And now there is a generation of little kids growing up wanting to be builders because of *Bob the Builder*. And builders had a pretty grim image before he came along: dirty, uncouth, unskilled and leery. Another objective is to provide a morale boost for our people, particularly to give succour to our best people so that they might set new standards for the rest and create a new culture,’ Ms Imgrund says.

### Get some respect

Another Red Spider consultant, Mark Gorman, sees the nursing brand as old fashioned. ‘Does anyone care these days? It is slow to progress and falls into two camps: old dragons and young babes, with nothing in between. Nursing is too much like hard work with all that making beds, turning over patients and emptying bed pans. It is all a bit *Carry On Nursing* in a lot of people’s minds – a bit like Skoda. They were not proper cars and were the butt of everyone’s jokes until perceptions were changed. Of course it did help that VW bought them,’ Mr Gorman says.

He suggests having a campaign about the perception and the reality. ‘It is not all emptying bedpans, you do not have to lift patients any more and it is not getting your bum pinched or mopping sweaty brows, à la Florence Nightingale. It is a profession with a career ladder and respect built in. My strategy would be to professionalise the trade and get some respect.’

Rex Features

Chris Wood, director of Communiqué, a leading consumer and business-to-business public relations consultancy, says nursing suffers from having two distinct images. 'On the one hand people are extraordinarily supportive of nurses and full of admiration for them as individuals who are selfless human beings. But the problems start when you look at the nursing profession and at the NHS and the way it is funded and managed.'

Mr Wood says the media coverage of nursing lacks a vital ingredient that would transform its public image. 'The debate in the media lacks the essential human face of nursing: all you end up hearing about is numbers and beds. You do not get the feeling that patients are human beings cared for by other wonderful human beings who are nurses. And nursing ends up being depicted as a faceless profession.'

There is no magic wand that can be waved to change the way nursing is viewed by the public, he says. Any campaign would have to reflect the reality of nursing, warts and all. But he says a lot could be done by the RCN and other organisations by seizing control of the press agenda and making it their own. 'You cannot come up with a fluffy PR solution. But at the national level the nursing profession seems to be passive. In the papers you only see government ministers and doctors – nurses seem to have a very small voice. I want nursing organisations to be much more proactive and militant in terms of owning the agenda, rather than just reacting to it.'

Mr Wood says nursing organisations should decide what needs to be changed and push their views into the public eye by skilfully using the power of national newspapers, television and radio. And choosing something like the heavy burden of administrative and bureaucratic tasks that are keeping nurses from the bedside would be a good place to start.

'We would develop a campaign to cut red tape. It would highlight the amount of time a "typical" nurse spends filling in bits of paper and we would launch a "Red Tape day". We would say to the press that nurses are having their hands tied behind their backs with red tape and use it as an opportunity to put forward all the positive messages. You would get a lot of coverage and create a platform to put across key messages about how you want nursing to be seen.'

He would also train front-line nurses to deal with the press so they would become the face

of the profession, like our campaign ambassadors. 'Eight or ten media-friendly nurses who are ward-based would create a much bigger impact in the media than any number of spokespeople. They would have the most powerful ammunition

## “Visible heads” should be restored, and a return to uniforms should help nurses, patients and relatives know who’s who’

because they are really doing nursing. That is what is missing in the way nursing messages are presented. Front-line nurses speaking about the real issues would get a very positive response from the media because they would be a breath of fresh air,' Mr Wood adds.

Tom Blackett, group deputy chair at global branding consultancy Interbrand, also says the public's perception of nursing is out of date. 'I think that of all the public services nursing has changed most dramatically in the past ten years. Nursing is now a profession with diverse career paths and lots of options to choose from. Interestingly, only about 25 per cent of those employed as nurses work on wards. Nursing remains a job for life, and nurses can take maternity leave, come back and resume their careers, full-time or part-time as they wish.

'The new nurse in the 21st century has to be seen as a professional; the system recognises this and great emphasis is placed on encouraging nurses to re-train and update their skills and qualifications. So the reality of nursing today is that it is a highly demanding profession with very high standards of technical and practical competence required for success.'

### Professionals who care

Mr Blackett says any re-branding needs to reflect these positive changes without alienating the public or throwing away positive aspects of the current image. 'Nurses hate being known as "the caring profession"; they would prefer to be seen as "the professionals who care". This is the change of image that is required.'

But he believes the image of nursing can be 'contaminated' by problems in the health service. 'While nurses are now encouraged to take special courses and degrees to improve their skills, there is much to suggest that the framework within which they operate has changed for the worse. This has a fundamental impact on the image of the profession.

'Hospitals are environments where leadership is essential and this is no longer encouraged or made evident. In the old days hospitals were run by matrons; now they are run by managers. Love them or hate them, matrons were highly visible; they would patrol the wards and knew all the nurses and patients.

'Everyone, relatives included, knew who was in charge and to whom they should go if they had an issue.' He says these and other changes ▶



Campaign ambassador Marjorie Small, matron

John Behets



BBC



**Campaign ambassador Hilary Rowell, nursing student**



**‘Focus first on external audiences but the internal audience is also important; re-branding will motivate staff’**

mean the public is unsure about who does what and where responsibilities lie. ‘Nowadays the dress code is lax and many senior nurses do not wear uniform at all. So roles and responsibilities are not clear, which is certainly bad for discipline and efficiency, and unhelpful for “the customer”. Over the years the one thing that stands out is that no one is in charge, a situation that has been exacerbated by the blurring of nursing and managerial roles.’

Mr Blackett’s recipe for a successful rebranding sounds a lot like the modern matron. ‘There is a feeling that nurses need to be given more control in the delivery of care. Let “professional people” look after the management of hospitals but keep them in the background. “Visible heads” should be restored, and a return to uniforms should help nurses, patients and relatives know who’s who.’

‘It is interesting that the police – a profession that has also changed enormously in the last few years – retains uniforms and there is no confusion when it comes to rank and responsibility,’ Mr Blackett says. ‘Ordinary nurses know things are not right and want to make it better. Nursing must be separated from politics, and restoring a strong identity for the profession is a way to help achieve this.’

#### Focus on careers

Peter Shaw is the director of Corporate Edge, a branding, design and communications consultancy. He says nursing could learn a lot from how the army and the police have re-branded themselves in recent years. ‘The army and the police have made concerted efforts to improve the quality and quantity of the people applying to enter those professions. They have really focused on careers – they say they will improve you as a professional and have emphasised the standard and quality of training available.’

He says the difficulty with any brand is that perceptions are driven by the reality. But certain aspects of the reality have a disproportionate affect on the overall perception.

Hospital cleanliness and getting rid of matrons are good examples that have affected how people think about nurses, he says. ‘We need to think about our consumers, the patients. We have to address their perception. People die in hospitals because the hospitals are not clean, whether that is nurses’ fault or the hospital’s fault. If it is nothing to do with nurses, then we need to be very clear about that, and say what nurses’ real role is in that situation.’

The army and the police have managed to present a very positive image about jobs that are at least as valuable to society – and as uncompromising – as nursing, Mr Shaw says. ‘The army has an extraordinary reputation. It has done amazingly well in delivering a positive view of its staff.’

‘A lot of that is because our soldiers are very good at what they do and when they are in incredibly dangerous situations, they seem to out-perform everyone else. With the army there is a kind of romantic aspect to it, the image of



**Queen’s message: filmed at an army base last year, next year an NHS hospital?**

gallant people “going in”. But as far as nursing is concerned, the reality is that if you have been in hospital and have been on the receiving end of nursing then there is no end of praise for nurses,’ Mr Shaw says.

Provided a product really is good, he says, re-branding can make a difference to its image. ‘With any brand, if the reality is not positive with consumers there is nothing you can do apart from changing the reality, otherwise it is like putting lipstick on a pig. You have to go back to the fundamental truths about the ultimate benefits that nurses deliver: care and helping patients to recover or die in a dignified and supported way. Nurses are about caring for your loved one and for you, and therefore it is hugely important.’

He says for any campaign to work it is vital to look at nurses in comparison with their ‘competitors’, such as the police, social workers, doctors, lawyers and other healthcare workers. ‘Putting nurses in context with these other workers enables a clearer view of their unique contribution.’

The audience for the campaign is important too. ‘Focus first on external audiences but the internal audience is also important; re-branding will motivate staff. And if other groups are getting a greater share of the attention, doctors, for example, you have to ask why,’ he says.

A key way to get the message across is to go right to the top. ‘Get the prime minister on board and start to get people to raise the profile. Every politician loves to be seen with a nurse.’

So there is certainly no shortage of ideas about how to modify the nursing brand to change the public’s perception of the profession.

And why stop at the prime minister? This year the Queen gave her Christmas message from an army barracks and praised the armed forces for their amazing resilience and skills. Wouldn’t it be fantastic if next year she spoke in praise of nurses from an NHS hospital? 