

# In Pursuit of Success

The story of Leader 1965 - 2015

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Rachel Hicks



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Leader celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2015. Herein lies the story of a remarkable man, Bryan Holden, who brought it to life and of how it grew and continues to thrive under the stewardship of the next generation of his family.

## Bryan's 10 Point Business Philosophy

- 1 Winning a new client is not a God-given right, it is a privilege.
- 2 Recommendation is the best way of winning new business.
- 3 Never rest on your laurels.
- 4 Make each client feel they are Number One.
- 5 Your company is a living, breathing entity. Keep it well nourished.
- 6 Your employees are all important. They are the company's most valuable assets.
- 7 A closed door is but one door nearer to an open door.
- 8 Always think positive. Negative thoughts only breed negativity.
- 9 A sound understanding of the would-be client's business, plus enthusiasm is vital to winning the account.
- 10 Celebrate a winning pitch with a star jump!

## Prologue

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It had been a big promise.

Today it was to be delivered.

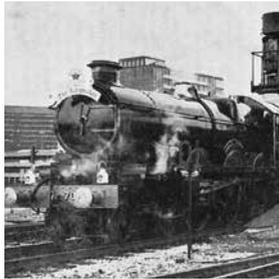
‘The Kingmaker’ was coming.

500 excited and expectant people aboard 7029 Clun Castle the specially commissioned vintage steam train bound for Warwick Castle arguably the finest mediaeval castle in England.

For many on board it would be the first and the last time they would ride the beautifully restored locomotive from Birmingham, the city of a 1001 trades, out through the peaceful Warwickshire countryside and on to the County town with its magnificent fortress pre-dating the Conqueror.

On arrival passengers on ‘The Kingmaker’, as it was affectionately known, were greeted by the sight of Roundheads and Cavaliers in Civil War battle regalia and a strong sense of stepping back ever further into history.

The day was a huge success. But it had been a risk. Martin Westwood, then general manager of Warwick Castle, knew this. But he had put his faith in a man who had promised to return his £500 investment to hire the track from British Rail for the day. He had put his faith in a man who had promised he would bring



## The Kingmaker

Preserved locomotive No 7029 Clum Castle prepares to leave Moor Street Station, Birmingham with 'The Kingmaker' steam special train to Warwick Castle 3rd April 1977.

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more than 500 visitors to the castle. He had put his faith in what might have sounded to some like a right royal pageant of a pipe dream and he had been rewarded.

The man behind this spectacular event was Bryan Holden, whose love of trains had begun as a boy when he'd waved to the locomotives passing near his house in Acocks Green, a former village subsumed by the burgeoning success that Birmingham had become.

The story of 'The Kingmaker' coming to Warwick Castle doesn't end with its arrival at the County town – it was an important milestone in many other ways for Bryan and his company Leader.

The day of 'The Kingmaker', which Bryan had created, merely cemented his position in the Midlands. By this point, he was a well-known and respected businessman as well as a successful author and a BBC broadcaster with a string of programme credits to his name. He had come a long way from early beginnings as a one man band in Pinfold Street, Birmingham...



# 1

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## 1931 - 1965 Formative Years

**T**he devastating effects of the Great Depression provided the backdrop for Bryan's birth in August 1931 to parents living in Smethwick, then part of Staffordshire. Oswald Moseley's Black Shirts were in the news, unemployment was rife and there was a run on the pound. George V was on the throne and the Labour Government of Ramsay MacDonald was about to resign to be replaced by a National Government. These were desperate times.

For the first seven years of his life, until the eve of the Second World War, Bryan stayed in Smethwick where his father was blessed with regular work. Like so many children born into decent working class families he was blissfully unaware of the problems that so many faced.

When the family hit harder times and moved to Acocks Green in 1938 it still resembled a rural village rather than the suburb it now is. Although this represented a massive upheaval, the compensating factor for Bryan was the proximity of his new home to the GWR main line between Paddington and Birmingham.



It was washday, and I rushed out of the scullery when I heard the rumble of wheels and the engine's shrill whistle. It was a great moment and I knew that at 6 o'clock it would be doing the return journey.

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"My eyes were opened to an exciting new world. We had moved into Roberts Road which was just five houses down from the trackside. I had the joy of seeing magnificent express trains rushing past which gave me an interest in railways and transport for the rest of my life.

"I'd see wonderful Castles and Kings and once war broke out I'd see all the munitions coming through; quite often I'd see the hospital trains with the boys in blue garb who'd been wounded. They'd wave to me through the window and in those days, all the drivers would wave too and there was a wonderful community spirit, amazing really when you think what they must have been through.

"I remember one day in particular. Great Western's 'King' class were huge locos that pulled the great express trains right past our door. The key locomotive was 6000 King George V. It had actually been exhibited in America and as a result, it had this wonderful

commemorative brass bell on the front buffer beam and glistening medallions on the cab side.

“It was washday, and I rushed out of the scullery when I heard the rumble of wheels and the engine’s shrill whistle. It was a great moment and I knew that at 6 o’clock it would be doing the return journey. So that meant a lot, it sort of connected me to a big wide world and that was exciting.”

How little would Bryan know that his boyhood passion would be indulged in ways he couldn’t possibly imagine as an eight year old in Acocks Green as war broke out. But it was this love of trains and transport, combined with his love of writing and drawing, which would contribute to his success as a businessman and help to prosper a number of his enterprises - most enduring being Leader Communications.

Bryan almost became a full time writer, not an advertising and PR man. At an early age he discovered his love of writing and rapidly gained peer approval.

“I went to Cottesbrook Road Junior in Acocks Green and one of the things that I loved to do was to write poems and short stories and take them into school. The teacher was very encouraging and would often ask me to read my work out to the class. On Friday afternoons, in particular, she would read stories to us as a treat, but eventually she started saying: ‘Do you want me to read you a story or do you want Bryan to read one of his?’ And the children would say: ‘Oh, we’ll have Bryan!’ So there was the start of my writing and I’ve written all my life.”

In 1942 Bryan passed his 11-plus and went to Yardley Grammar. But there was a problem. The family finances were too far stretched to pay for his uniform

and sports equipment and too proud to ask the school for help. Bryan, however, took a job as a grocery delivery boy to provide the extra funds and got stuck in.

He quickly discovered that his strengths certainly did lie in English literature and essay writing and not in algebra and geometry. He developed a particular love of short stories – wanting the thrill of the conclusion to come quickly. He devoured the giants of the genre – the likes of GK Chesterton, JB Priestley and Somerset Maugham.

Whilst at Yardley he entered a national essay writing competition. Completely under his own steam he wrote his essay and although he didn't win first prize he was thrilled to be awarded a supplementary prize. Pretty soon his school got wind of his achievement.

“The next thing I know, I'm standing in assembly with the whole of the school, about 500 of us, and the headmaster comes on the stage, as he did at every morning assembly.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘This morning we have to congratulate Holden, who's won a prize in a National Essay competition.’ And I had to go marching up in front of everyone to receive a certificate.”

Despite this early endorsement of literary talent and a desire to continue his education, Bryan's academic ambitions were cut short when he turned 16. Sadly funds were not available for him to progress to the Higher School Certificate and University. It was time for him to earn a wage and start contributing to the household.

Alas, his family's ideas about jobs and his were poles apart. Not surprisingly Bryan wanted to be a writer but he couldn't see how to achieve that. His mother in particular believed a safe job with the Post Office, the Police or the Council would be a better bet as although they weren't the best paid jobs, they offered security of employment and the all important retirement pension. The trouble was this sort of job left Bryan cold.

"I'd left school and I'd only been at home about two days when my mother said: 'Well, what are you going to do? Don't think you can just sit there and do nothing, you'd better go and get a job!' So in a fit of pique, I just looked in the jobs section of the Evening Mail and there I saw Tea Boy Wanted at an advertising agency, Elliott Advertising, in Birmingham."

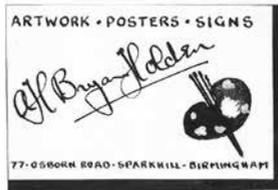
At 16 years of age Bryan was employed at £1 a week and training was thrown in.

"The production manager said: 'The first thing you've got to do Holden is to learn how to make tea, you've got to keep us replenished with tea.' I also had to pack parcels and run around delivering things but at the same time I was learning the advertising game.

"I showed the boss a few of my drawings from school. He said: 'Mmmm, possibly' and eventually offered me a position as a trainee artist. I learnt how to do hand-lettering and simple line drawings as well as the many aspects of layout and design. However, first and foremost I still wanted to be a writer and was delighted to be given the opportunity to work alongside a copywriter."

A rise to £3 a week came when Bryan was 18 and by now he was handling a score of small client accounts, mostly based in the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham. "Those in the jewellery trade were known as the 'Toymakers of Birmingham', so I wrote a series of ads based around that particular heritage. I also handled a number of engineering accounts and was beginning to feel that I was proving my worth to the agency."

Bryan began to believe he could better himself further so he decided to embark on a correspondence course, paid for out of his own pocket, for the Institute of



Top: Early Business Card

Business Card developed by 16 year-old Bryan Holden

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Bottom: Bryan Holden 1948

The Elliott Advertising tea boy

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Practitioners in Advertising exams. In order to do so he had to get a deferment from National Service, but he subsequently discovered that this meant his salary was pegged however much his workload increased.

“So after a while, I thought, right I’m not accepting this false ceiling anymore, I’m going to do my National Service.”

At 20 years of age he joined the RAF and went to Padgate Camp near Warrington to complete his basic training. He took a somewhat unconventional route through these first eight weeks.

“The officer in charge wanted some drawings and posters done and I ended up doing them. Whilst the others were marching off round the square in slush and snow (it was winter time) there I was sitting in a warm hut with a flaming fire doing what I liked best – writing and drawing.”

This is how life often worked out for Bryan. But not always. After basic training he was sent to RAF Melksham in Wiltshire to train as an electrical engineer. To his dismay he was then sent to El Firdan, a remote outpost in the Suez Canal zone in Egypt, where he was to have little or no time to complete his advertising studies, so he put in for a transfer.

“The officer in charge of the electrical section called me in... ‘So you’re not happy here, Holden.’ I said: ‘It’s not that I’m unhappy, sir, I’m very happy in a good team of people, but I’m trying to do my studies as well and with all the guard duties it’s impossible to find the time.’ The officer continued: ‘You’re one of the best guys that we’ve got’ - I was servicing generators and things like that. He said: ‘Leave it with me’ and later on he told me: ‘Right, we’ve got you a position in the accumulator charging room.’ This was where all the lead acid batteries were sent



El Firdan - Ready to go

On guard duty, 'For King & Country'

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to be charged up. It was a 24/7 operation and involved shift work. I had no more guard duties, and so, in between, I was free to progress my studies.”

It was an uncertain future that awaited Bryan when he returned home at the end of his National Service. He entertained ideas about joining the Merchant Navy (a great way to generate experiences for his writing) but whilst he was weighing up his options, he returned to Elliot’s advertising agency, where he started to handle client accounts on a proper basis and write copy. To his dismay however he discovered his £3 a week salary was still fixed. Fate then took a hand and a rival agency, Hoffmann and Co, headhunted him and doubled his salary to £6 a week.

The news that Bryan was leaving Elliot’s for Hoffmann’s didn’t go down well.

“I don’t want an Elliott man to become a rolling stone,” said Bryan’s boss. But it was too late, as Bryan replied: “I’ve given my word to Hoffmann’s and if I give my word, I honour it.”

His first day at Hoffmann’s turned out to be momentous. As he stepped into the lift on his first morning, his life would be changed forever.

“The lift was quite crowded but there at the back I saw this beautiful girl with auburn hair and I thought, my, she’s lovely! She looked just like Doris Day, who was my pin up in those days. When I got out of the lift, she did too and I discovered she worked for Hoffmann’s in the accounts department. It was love at first sight and I was determined to marry her. I knew that if I cleared off to join the Merchant Navy, there was a chance I could lose her - there were a lot of suitors who wanted to take Barbara Harrington out.”



### Bryan Holden's Desk

20 year-old Bryan's desk at Elliott Advertising prior to leaving for National Service with the RAF. As a Production Assistant Bryan was earning £3.00 per week.

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Bryan was 23, Barbara was 21. Within a few short months they were engaged to be married. A marriage that would span more than five decades and bring happiness, children and immense support for Bryan's businesses.

Life at Hoffmann's was moving apace. Bryan was soon taken under the wing of John Broad, one of the agency's best and brightest players, who spotted his potential. John was a great salesman who had a knack of winning business. Bryan became his assistant and John was to have a profound impact on his protégé's career.

"John Broad had won major accounts like the West Midlands Gas Board, Cannon Cookers and Neptric Vacuum Cleaners. He was a great negotiator and I worked alongside him over the next five years. He trained me up as an Account Executive and we were a great twosome handling more than a £1m worth of business – an awful lot of money in those days.

"He told me many wonderful stories which inspired me. One of his favourites dated back to the Depression Years of the 1930s. He was a commission-only door to door salesman, and he was bringing up a young family. All week he'd been tramping the streets trying to sell, a type of refrigerator, to butcher's shops. 'I'd got holes in my shoes... I'd got a young wife and a baby living in rented accommodation and here I was at eight o'clock on a Friday night and I hadn't made a single sale all week!'

He'd made 39 calls during the week and was in utter despair feeling he couldn't go home and tell his wife. 'Then,' John would continue, 'I looked down this alleyway and there was a light in a window. It was a kosher butcher's and I went down and knocked on the door and the owner let me in. He was clearing up and he bought one of the refrigerators off me.

I'd knocked on my fortieth door and made a sale!

“And John went on: ‘What you’ve got to realise in life is this, Bryan, providing you’re selling a good product or service there’s a law of averages - you might have to make 20-30 calls before you make a sale ... maybe even 40 calls. But you must never give up, you have to keep going at it. Eventually you’ll get a sale and you’ll keep on succeeding.’

“So that’s always stuck in my mind, success, at least in part, is down to persistence,” Bryan concluded.

Bryan continued with his studying and at the age of 28 became a fully qualified Practitioner in Advertising. By now Hoffmann’s had amalgamated with H C Longley to become Longley’s & Hoffmann – a major provincial agency employing more than 100 staff. This opened up new opportunities for Bryan and within a few years he was promoted to associate director, responsible for a major group of clients.

There was no doubt that his career at L & H was blossoming and providing him with incredibly valuable experience, but he was ambitious and determined to further improve himself. It was at this time that one of his major clients made a successful attempt to headhunt him. They wanted him as their marketing director and as a sweetener offered to more than double his salary.

“They said: ‘We’ll pay you £3,750 a year and a Morris Oxford motor and you’ll be on the Board as a full time director.’

It really was too good an offer to turn down.

L & H didn’t want to lose Bryan though. They threw everything at him. They matched his wage, offered him any car he wanted and a seat on the Board. But once again Bryan’s integrity came to the fore and he honoured his agreement with his new employer.

But the move didn't turn out to be the exciting challenge Bryan had hoped for.

"It didn't suit me. I quickly realised I preferred the cut and thrust of an advertising agency. I liked working on different accounts, I loved winning new business. I didn't want to be working on just one product."

What he perhaps hadn't recognised in himself was that he was an innovator. A man hungry for new business experiences and full of original ideas. A few years earlier, whilst still working at L & H and needing extra money for his new family (a son, James Bryan, was born in 1960 and the family had moved from rented accommodation in Sparkhill to a newly built house in the rural village of Knowle), his entrepreneurial spirit had already come to the fore.

"I had this great idea," he explains. "I thought, I can go round the local tradespeople - the butcher, the greengrocer, the hairdressers, the chemist - and create a free sheet where they can advertise their goods and services to the local community. I called it 'The Bargain Shopper' and set up a company called Marketing and Sales Promotions - M & SP. With an old school friend, we produced the free sheet and then distributed it door to door throughout the Knowle area."

Writing and designing his own publications wasn't new to Bryan. A promising athlete, he had joined Sparkhill Harriers at 16 as a sprinter, and had some notable successes over the next fourteen years. He jokes that he is still using the pressure cooker he won at one of his early races. It's still going strong nearly 60 years later!

When he was just 18 years old, he wrote the 50th Anniversary history of the Sparkhill Harriers Club. With his entrepreneurial spirit he didn't rest on his laurels, selling advertising space to cover the cost of printing and deploying his



### Sparkhill Harriers Golden Jubilee Brochure

Written, designed and advertising space secured by 18-year-old Bryan

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artistic talent to create all the artwork for it too. He also produced the club's newsletter, *The Mercurian*, charting its successes and sharing members' news.

Athletics played a large role in Bryan's life until his late twenties. When he met Barbara she was keen to get involved too and together they trained and socialised with friends at the athletic club. As usual, Bryan wanted to push himself to achieve more. He trained very hard after discovering that his forte was the quarter mile – the 440 yards – and when he was 28 he broke the 50 seconds barrier for the first time in a competitive relay for the club.

But then work intervened. His chairman asked him what he did in his spare time and when Bryan answered 'Athletics', the chairman replied: "It's about time you paid more attention to your career instead of galloping around a track at your age."

These words struck home and Bryan gave up athletics to concentrate even more closely on his business.



It's about time you paid more attention to your career instead of galloping around a track at your age.



## The 100 yards

Bryan in the 100 yards at Halesowen Schools 1948 meeting  
in the colours of Sparkhill Harriers.

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# 2

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## 1965 - 1983 Moving On Up

**A**fter six months in his new job as an in-house marketing director, a dissatisfied and frustrated Bryan wandered down to a local café one lunchtime and sat contemplating his future. L & H had tried to tempt him back again but it wasn't what he wanted. He ordered his food and sat down, lost in his thoughts.

"I was thinking, I really want to start my own business, but I haven't got any money and I haven't got any clients. I looked up and sitting across the table there was a chap who'd worked alongside me some years before."

He was now the advertising manager at Carter Thermal Engineering, a manufacturer of industrial air conditioning units, and we got talking.

"I look after the advertising and PR work for the company," he said. "We've got a London PR agency but they're not great and we're paying them £1,500 a year. You could do it standing on your head."

This was all the encouragement Bryan needed to go it alone. Seizing the

opportunity, he rented desk space in a one room office in Pinfold Street, in the centre of Birmingham, behind a red door in the middle of a 48 sheet poster hoarding.

It was here that his new company, Leader Art & Press Services began, on May 4th 1965 the very day his third child, Susan was born.

He paid himself nothing for three months, then as more work was added to the Carter Thermal contract he took a salary of £20 a week. By now the time was right for Alf Hill, Bryan's former assistant at L & H, to come on board. It was the start of a successful partnership which was to last some 18 years.

"We worked fantastically well together, particularly in the early days, and the business took off like a rocket," explains Bryan. "We were a force to be reckoned with."

Alf and Bryan soon took on their first employee - an artist. At this

point they had grown too large for their shared one room office in Pinfold Street and they moved to offices over a printer's in King Edward Road not far from what is now the International Convention Centre. The offices were part of an old rabbit skin warehouse and all the hooks were still left in the wall. They whitewashed it, took on more artists and the business really began to grow.

It was at this point that the owner of Seal Advertising Service, who also worked out of the offices in Pinfold Street, offered to sell his business. Bryan and Alf were keen to acquire it as the agency had the official recognition of the Periodical Proprietors Association. This would enable them to place advertisement space in a wide range of magazines and duly receive an agency commission. It was a major step forward.

Seal and Leader were run as parallel businesses and both flourished.

Bryan picks up the story: “My policy has always been that a company is a living thing. If you keep dragging every penny out of it, you’ll starve it. You’ve got to feed it, stroke it and look after it. Don’t treat it like a cash cow. So Alf and I tried to live as frugally as possible, reinvesting what we made back into the company, employing more staff and winning more business.”

Throughout this hectic time in his life, and indeed through all their marriage, Barbara was a huge support to Bryan.

“She had a very calming way which I valued greatly. She was also very careful never to let success go to my head, keeping my feet firmly on the ground,” he said.

As the businesses continued to thrive new premises were needed. Leader and Seal acquired much larger and more prestigious offices in Calthorpe Road, Edgbaston (not far from the famous cricket ground) for what seemed a lot of rent in those days. £2,000 a year. The work kept coming in, bigger and better.

A hugely successful campaign at this time involved an ingenious industrial fastener and the promotional services of one of Britain’s most famous comedians. It was also to produce a lifelong personal friendship and a business relationship that benefitted both agency and client.

Precision Screw and Manufacturing (PSM), a Willenhall-based manufacturer of industrial fastening devices, had a new employee – Jimmy Tildesley. He was the son of the owner, Jack Tildesley. ‘A young lion,’ as his father described him and head of marketing. He had great ideas but little budget.

Leader and Seal were charged with developing a corporate identity, new sales



## Birmingham Horse Parade Cannon Hill Park

Bryan with his wife Barbara. The Parade ran from 1987 -  
1995 and attracted over 140 heavy horses  
turnouts and crowds of 25,000 +

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literature and a striking vehicle livery. Next, a direct marketing campaign was undertaken for one of the sheet metal fastening devices. Market research indicated that the take up was unlikely to exceed one per cent of the target audience. Such a return in relation to the type of product would normally be considered good, but Leader and PSM were determined to do better and delivered a most innovative and creative mailshot, incorporating a sample of the product for the would-be customer to try out.

The result was a phenomenal 12 per cent reply rate. Sales of the product went through the roof and production and factory floor space had to be increased to meet demand.

Meanwhile an innovative new product was being developed by PSM. It was a steel bolt, onto the threads of which, a globule of anaerobic resin was applied so that when the bolt was tightened the resin filled the threads ensuring an unshakeable fix. Styled the 'Tuflok' it was a joint initiative between PSM and the manufacturers of Superglue.

An exhibition stand was booked at a trade fair in Olympia to launch the product. An eye-catching six-foot tall polystyrene model of the Tuflok bolt was set alongside a life size cut out of Ken Dodd, one of Britain's most popular comedians of the time, proclaiming the tag line 'It's Tuflokacious!'

Leader had pulled out all the stops to secure the services of Ken Dodd to help promote the product. He arrived at the press preview at the PSM factory, organised by Leader, in a vintage open top car plastered in 'Tuflokacious' posters. He took the place by storm, entertaining the workers as he toured the premises.



## It's TUFLOKACIOUS

Launch of the Tuflok bolt at Olympia.

From left to right: Bryan; Ken Dodd; Jimmy Tildesley (PSM);  
Alf Hill.

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Jack Tildesley, however, thought the whole thing ‘a circus’ and locked himself in his office. Bryan managed to explain that Doddy was much more than Diddymen and Tickling Sticks. In fact, he had shown great interest in the automated machinery and asked to meet ‘Mr Jack’ to learn first hand about his engineering skills. In the end, the pair got on so well that Bryan was sent to break up their discussions when it was time for Doddy to leave.

The relationship between Leader and PSM lasted more than two decades until the company was bought out by an international engineering giant in a multi-million pound deal. One day, out of the blue, in the mid 1980’s, Bryan received a letter from Jimmy Tildesley now living in Spain. In it he recalled his first meeting with Bryan: “I remember we talked about PR which I had virtually never heard of...”

He went on to reminisce about the 1969 Fastener Show in London, featuring Ken Dodd and the Tufflok bolt, which launched the company as a major international supplier. He revelled in the overseas launch orchestrated by Leader: “We supplied every likely distributor in Europe with direct mail in their own language, which in those days was unheard of.”

“The Precision News (newsletter) was an absolute success with a 20 per cent reply rate (which people still don’t believe) and then you moved us into sophisticated 4 colour brochures. There’s no doubt in my mind that Leader, and you in particular, were one of the significant factors in PSM’s success. Further, I don’t think that this could have been achieved without the wonderful personal rapport which we enjoyed together from that very first day!”

Bryan’s strongly maintained view that customers are a privilege was borne out by the longevity and success of Leader’s work with PSM, and the enduring



There's no doubt in my mind that Leader, and you in particular, were one of the significant factors in PSM's success. Further, I don't think that this could have been achieved without the wonderful personal rapport which we enjoyed together from that very first day!

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relationship between himself and Jimmy Tildesley.

Leader and Seal went on to win an abundance of industrial and business-to-business accounts including Cannon Cookers, NFU Mutual Assurance and IMI. They also began to make inroads into the burgeoning house building and construction field with key companies such as Bovis Homes.

Another major win was Quinton Hazell Automotive Parts and its sister company Partco, both under the entrepreneurial direction of their eponymous founder.

Later Quinton Hazell bought-out a multiplicity of Tyre and Exhaust Centres and coalesced them under the title of Standard Motorist Centres. In a tight and highly competitive pitch against a London agency Leader and Seal combined to win the press advertising and PR business with a spend of over £250,000.

Leader was charged with ensuring new depot openings made the maximum impact and this involved arranging spectacular street parades, with marching bands, Michelin Men and other street performers.

“It was an exciting, adrenaline-rousing business,” recalls Bryan. “Each new opening needed to be a big time event. If the depot didn’t get off to a good start, it was unlikely that it would catch up. We arranged editorial features in the local press and on radio with competitions for children and adults and a host of prizes to be won.

“Openings were always on a Saturday and by the following Tuesday all the sales figures would have been compiled and analyzed. We awaited the phone call from the client with baited breath: there was no excuse for failure!”

As Leader and Seal continued to grow, a new concept was developed to promote more effectively the services which the two companies had to offer. It was called Total Communications – a one-stop shop where clients were guaranteed the precise blend of services to ensure they achieved the best possible results for their budget.

But it wasn’t all easy going. Bryan recalls the time when the print unions became extremely militant and demanded that artists employed by advertising agency art studios should become members of the union, otherwise artwork from the agency would be ‘blacked’ and denied publication within various media.

Bryan recalls: “Heads of Birmingham agencies got together and we formed a united front and faced-out the unions together. Eventually they backed off. What we never saw coming was the camaraderie that developed between us

all. We realised that even though we were competitors we enjoyed meeting with each other and so we set up the 021 club, which still exists today. At the time it was a reference to the telephone code for Birmingham and the club was limited to 21 members.”

After 18 successful and prosperous years together, running both Leader and Seal, Bryan and Alf decided to go their separate ways. Alf took the Seal name along with some of the advertising and PR accounts. Bryan continued to run Leader and formed a new advertising agency called Bryan Holden Advertising (BHA).

Whilst this was a period of major change and re-organisation, none of this put the brakes on the indefatigable Bryan. When an account was won, he always acknowledged the role all his team played in the success. Everyone was invited into the boardroom where he would congratulate the team on their sterling efforts and then instigate a group star jump!



# 3

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## 1983 - 1995 Generation X

The restructuring which took place in 1983 provided opportunities for new growth. Bryan's 23-year-old eldest son, James, joined the business as an advertising assistant - despite Bryan actively standing aside from the appointment process. "I hadn't ever thought about any of my children coming to work with me," he explained. "But my fellow directors made the decision to employ James as they recognised he had marketing skills which we needed."

James was already well prepared to work in the competitive world of PR and advertising. As a youngster he, along with his two younger siblings, had enjoyed the fruits of his father's success - a comfortable, loving home and an executive lifestyle. He had succeeded in getting into the local grammar school, Tudor Grange in Solihull, but it was no comfy ride. "You had to learn to survive in what was then a very competitive and in many ways, quite an aggressive environment," he explained.

"There used to be a thing called the Hardness League, where one of the lads had drawn up a list of who he thought was the toughest kid in the class and who

was the weakest. You could upscale in that league by challenging someone up to two places above you to a fight. If you were victorious, you would be promoted in the Hardness League and defeat had the reverse effect. Suffice to say I held my own.”

After graduating from Sheffield University with a History degree James located to London to train as a chartered accountant with Touche Ross. After the first year he left, but the business grounding it gave him was to stand him in good stead in years to come. And like his father before him, he was to meet his first wife, Emma, at work.

From his home in Fulham he found a new job with Rank Xerox on their management training programme. James maintains that his time at Tudor Grange was a good grounding for working in Xerox.

“The section manager welcomed me by asking: ‘Tell me, James, what’s the difference between Rank Xerox and British Rail?’ I said: ‘I’m afraid

I can’t answer that question.’ His immediate retort was: “British Rail carry passengers, we don’t!”

It was in this cut-throat, commissioned-based, sales-driven world that James discovered he was a good salesman.

“I listened to people, I found out what their needs were and I presented them with the right Xerox machine for their requirements.”

So, equipped with a knowledge of accountancy and a proven ability to sell, James began looking for the right business in which to settle. It was on his 23rd birthday in 1983 that he started at his father’s business. He began working for BHA but within a week realised that it was PR, not advertising, where his heart lay and he moved over to Leader.

Leader and BHA together employed around 30 people in the early 1980’s. James proved to be good with clients and realised the importance of producing results. He found it



## On The Case

James (in the sheepskin) liked to get out and talk directly to the people to get their views.

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led to clients investing more of their marketing budget in PR. In fact, within James' first year he and Bryan grew Leader's income dramatically and it continued at a tremendous rate for four or five years.

Father and son were turning out to be a great partnership. Warwick Castle, a major Midlands tourist attraction was already on the books of BHA and Leader but the concept of Total Communications assured Leader would play a larger role.

'The Kingmaker' visit to the Castle in 1977 had not just been successful in bringing visitors, it had also played a lead role in a BBC TV film 'For the Love of Steam' for which Bryan had been the presenter. His love of railways had led him to become the honorary director of information at the Birmingham Railway Museum and part of his remit was to arrange steam specials.

The day 'The Kingmaker' steamed 500 visitors from Birmingham

to Warwick was a huge success, extensively reported in the press, on radio and on television.

Martin Westwood, manager of Warwick Castle was delighted with the outcome and reported a record visitor attendance for the day and when Warwick Castle was looking to appoint a PR consultancy, Leader was privileged to be invited to take part in a competitive pitch. It proved to be the start of a highly successful partnership, a success story that was to grow and flourish for many years.

An even more far reaching PR and marketing campaign initiated by Leader on behalf of Warwick Castle was the launch of a national short story writing competition centred on the legendary ghosts believed to haunt the location. Bryan and Martin were brainstorming at the castle one day when Martin mentioned the ghosts. He told Bryan about the legendary Moll Bloxham, a serving wench who'd dabbled in black magic. She was

dismissed for diluting the milk and is said to have jumped into the nearby River Avon and transmogrified into a devilish black dog.

Bryan put it to Martin that these were the ideal ingredients for a short story competition with great potential. The aim of the Leader campaign was to:

1. Draw visitors to the castle to soak up the historic atmosphere for their stories.
2. Stimulate sales of the castle guide book for background information.
3. Create widespread editorial coverage throughout printed and broadcast media.

A panel of judges had to be appointed, so Bryan contacted his favourite author, Susan Hill, writer of the world famous story and play *The Woman in Black*. She not only consented but also brought in prestigious fellow writers to serve on the judging panel.

Once the details of the competition were released, the response from the public was incredible. More than 8,000 entry forms were requested, far exceeding expectations. More than a thousand stories were submitted for judging.

As the pile of press clippings grew it became clear the competition had become an international phenomenon. Even a newspaper in Texas had run the competition as a double page feature.

The culmination of the campaign was the publication of a collection of short stories, under the title "Ghosts Have No Feelings". It was available exclusively from the Warwick Castle bookshop, and was designed and produced by Leader. So it was, on the back of this success, that Warwick Castle grew into one of

Leader's key PR accounts in the mid 80's. James oversaw the two aspects of the account – the visitor PR and the crisis PR. It was largely because of this account that he was able to grow Leader, and employ more staff. Leader's relationship with Warwick Castle lasted 25 years, until the holding company decided to centralise marketing activities.

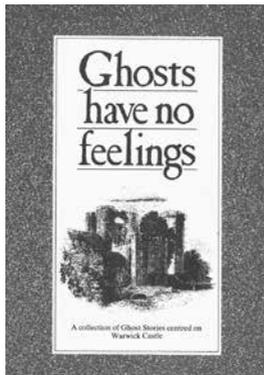
In 1987 Coventry City FC won the FA Cup and it was also the year that Leader won one of its most exciting accounts. Coventry City Council was developing new initiatives to recover from the demise of the motor industry. It had a 72 acre green field site which offered the potential for a major Business Park, but the council needed to attract blue-chip organisations and convince them to relocate to Coventry.

BHA was invited to pitch. But the budget to support such a widespread advertising campaign was relatively small and Bryan made the point that he felt it should be

spearheaded by a PR, media-led campaign not advertising alone. A few days after the pitch, the council rang up. They had seen 12 agencies, including major London ones and they said: "The bad news is nobody has won the account. The good news is we are going to do the pitch again and it will be PR media-led as you suggested."

So Leader put together another pitch and on the day of the presentation Bryan recalls that there was a whole roomful of people present. His tactic in such situations was to locate the decision maker - often the one person saying the least.

James led the pitch. "And when he finished," Bryan recalls, "I stood up and looked directly at the Chairman. I said: 'Mr Chairman, you may be wondering why a Brummie is telling you, a Coventrian, how to do your publicity. But I feel closer to Coventry than you may realise. When I was a young boy during the war I can vividly remember the



### Warwick Castle Ghost Story Competition

18 stories, including the winning entry 'Ghosts have no feelings' were gathered together by Leader into a paperback book available to buy from Warwick Castle bookshop. It remained in print for 10 years.

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‘All Clear’ sounding. I got out of our air raid shelter and saw the red glow in the sky and was told that Coventry was in flames. I’ve never forgotten the poignant feeling I had that night and from that moment on Coventry has always been near to my heart.’ I finished by saying: ‘You sir, have got the Cup Final in a fortnight’s time. You want a win and so do I.’ With that I sat down. Well, James was appalled, simply appalled. He was so embarrassed at my emotional outburst.

“But later we were both elated when Leader won the account.”

To launch the Business Park and attract representatives from major businesses, Leader staged a launch event at the RAC offices in Pall Mall, London. Hosted by the Mayor of Coventry, 22 of the 24 invited journalists turned up resulting in national and international media coverage. Within a matter of weeks Barclays Bank had signed up with the prospect of 500 of their staff relocating to Coventry.

James recalls how Leader was put under an absolute curfew, nothing could be said about the fact that Barclays were coming.

“One day a senior PR executive from Barclays phoned up and spoke to me. She started by asking me about Barclays moving to Coventry. But I twigged it and said; ‘What do you mean? I know nothing about this. Are you really coming to Westwood Business Park?’

“She was testing to see whether we could be trusted. Of course we passed with flying colours and she gave a great report back to the council and that really helped our relationship with them.”

The contract was for 12 months, but after 10 months, Leader had orchestrated such a great campaign that the job was done. With Barclays coming, many others had soon followed suit.

Bryan has always believed in developing long-term relationships with clients. It’s part of his philosophy of wanting a client for life not just for a few years.

“I’ve had many situations where prospective clients have come along with an initial budget of say £10,000 and in five years time they’re spending over £100,000 with us. We always worked as an extension of our clients’ Marketing Department and as a result kept accounts for years.”

James recalls how his father’s influence in the Midlands helped Leader win business. Bryan, by this time, had been in the industry for more than 30 years. He’d handled a considerable number of clients, knew a wide variety of people and had earned a high profile, so there were lots of opportunities to pitch.

One such opportunity came due to a change in regulations, as James remembers: “In the mid-late eighties, accountants were allowed to advertise for the first time, and start to promote themselves. We were appointed by Robson Rhodes and I worked out a whole programme which included Budget Day briefing breakfasts, an editorial deal with the local newspaper for people who wanted to start up their own business and Survive and Thrive seminars for business entrepreneurs. It was a very creative period which combined dad’s ability to get out there and meet people with my ability to plan campaigns and deliver the goods.”

Bryan’s varied passions for work and play led to success in many extra curricular activities too. His love of horses led to him founding the Birmingham Harness Horse Society, which presented the Birmingham Horse Parade for eight years at Canon Hill Park. Working horses hadn’t taken part in such a parade in the city since 1952. It was such a successful revival that at one time 140 turnouts paraded around the park and adjacent roads.

Leader persuaded The Birmingham Mail to come onboard and regular full page features appeared in the press, with photographs of the horses and comments from readers who’d worked with these animals. Television and radio played a big

part in publicising the event and at the opening parade it was estimated that more than 25,000 people gathered to watch.

One day a new business opportunity arrived in the post. The company, Industrial Cleaning Papers (ICP), was completely unknown to James and Bryan. They produced wipes and tissues for use in washrooms, on the farm and in factories. Bryan remembers the budget was small and so Leader based their pitch around creating a newspaper (Paperfacts) that could be distributed through ICP's nationwide network of sales agents.

After the pitch, the managing director of ICP announced: "Right we've already made up our mind to go with you. The point is, you stuck to the brief and pitched within the budget, no one else did. Now for the good news – you've got double the spend because whatever our input, our Swedish partners are putting in an equal amount too. Well done!"

Leader's success had once again come down to honesty and straight talking. ICP welcomed their sensible 'can – do' approach.

Bryan's philosophy that you must always nurture your business and never rest on your laurels when it seems you have enough clients, paid rich dividends.

There was a time when he was reading The Birmingham Post and saw a company announcing their annual figures. He didn't think the advertisement did justice to the company's standing, so he called up the managing director saying: "Look I'm very impressed at seeing your figures in the paper today, but can I come right to the point, your advert really needs some work."

He was invited to visit the business and put forward his ideas which resulted in an account win of over £60,000.



## Birmingham Horse Parade Cannon Hill Park

Bryan with a young enthusiast with the famous Whitbread Shires.

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One of the biggest challenges facing any agency is to keep an account fresh and vital for a long standing client. So it was that in the mid 1980's Leader and BHA jointly faced this challenge with their client Yale Security Products, the internationally renowned manufacturer of locks and keys.

The agency had held the account successfully for upwards of eight years, but an increasingly competitive market-place demanded a completely new approach. The agency was invited to re-pitch against three other top Midlands agencies.

Research identified that Yale had become the generic name for all keys for what are known as rim locks. It was vital to drive home the fact that Yale keys were foremost in the marketplace and "Yale is the Key to Top Security" was the chosen tag-line.

To demonstrate this Bryan took a bunch of serrated 'Yale' type keys into the presentation and held up each one in turn. All present guessed Yale for each

one, which wasn't correct, but proved how generic their product had become. Leader and BHA pitched a combined presentation of press advertising, point of sale merchandising and packaging and PR – a perfect example of Total Communications – and were duly reappointed.

As the 1980s drew to a close, the lease on the Calthorpe Road premises came up for renewal and concurrently a major, and costly refurbishment of the rambling Georgian property would be necessary.

With an eye on future expansion, Bryan decided to move BHA and Leader into modern office accommodation in the prestigious Chamber of Commerce House, just around the corner from Calthorpe Road.

Around the same time, however, Bryan's wife Barbara was diagnosed with a chronic illness and Bryan (now nearly 60) was keen to spend time holidaying and travelling with her while she was still able.

As a result, BHA was sold to one of the agency's senior directors, a man well able to take the company forward. And in 1991 James was promoted to Managing Director of Leader with Bryan as Chairman.

Shortly afterwards, Leader was invited to pitch for a contract with Regional Railways, one of three new passenger sectors created by British Rail. A cross-country route, it linked the coastal town of Barmouth on the West Coast of Wales with the East Coast town of Great Yarmouth.

It was a six-way pitch. Leader was well aware of the quality of the competition and knew that it had to pull out all the stops.

The primary purpose of the contract was to unite the workforce into supporting the new enterprise and seeing it as a positive way forward. And so, prior to the pitch Leader decided it was essential to undertake a fact-finding tour of the line and Bryan spent three days crossing from coast to coast, stopping off at stations along the route to meet with staff and get their reaction to the new organisation.

As a direct result, James was able to draw up the master plan which focussed on the publication of regular staff newsletters – one for the entire workforce plus a number of regional variations. Having won the account, Leader appointed an overall editor, who in turn recruited experienced reporters and photographers in the various regions. This ensured that the articles included in the various newsletters were pertinent to staff in that geographic location, vastly increasing readership. Bryan continued to get out and about, talking directly with staff to hear what they had to say first-hand.

He recalls a visit to the Lincolnshire town of Boston where he was met by a particularly disgruntled group of railway workers.

He was told: “You’re wasting your time coming here. We’ve seen it all before. You’re just another management mouthpiece not really interested in us.” Bryan replied: “Gentlemen, please let me assure you. I’ll publish all that you have to say – no holds barred. But if you don’t believe me, I’ll be catching the next train back to Birmingham.” As he walked out the room, he heard a voice call out: ‘Sorry about that, mate, come back in’.

And so the relationship with Regional Railways went from strength to strength. Bryan puts it down to being able to see and understand what the common man wants.

Life at this time was enjoyable for James. He and his growing family moved out of Birmingham to Claverdon in Warwickshire. Leader was prosperous and he worked closely with his clients. He had taken up the reins of Leader and was successfully winning new clients. Yet, despite the achievements in this time, few awards, if any, were entered let alone won.

“Dad didn’t believe in awards. He took the view that awards were there for people to boast about the work they had done. He was much more interested in winning clients and doing a first-class job,” James remembers.

The awards were to come in time.



## Regional Railways

Bryan with Mark Causebrook, Director, Regional Railways Central.

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## 1995 - 2013 The Henley Years

The mid 1990's were a time of change not only in the ethos of Leader but also in its location. James, now solely in charge of Leader, moved the Leader team out of Birmingham to Henley in Arden, Warwickshire. There was good growth at this time - from 1998 onwards Leader began to be ranked in the top 150 PR consultancies nationwide. James' vision for the company was to become more professional and to grow.

In his modesty James puts the success of Leader down to 'writing good proposals that worked.' Greggs the Bakers was a point in question. For 10 years, between 1996 and 2006,

Greggs, alongside Warwick Castle, was Leader's largest grossing customer.

Home of the sausage roll and lunchtime pasty, Newcastle-based Greggs, was dissatisfied with its PR in the Midlands region. Their marketing director approached half a dozen consultancies in the area and ended up appointing Leader. The reason Leader got the contract was because they were the only people prepared to give Greggs some ideas for a modest fee of £5,000 a year. Nobody else thought it was a decent enough budget.

One of Leader's competitors, approached by Greggs, compared notes



## 2003 Vintage

The Leader team in 2003 left to right: Sarah Priddis, Anna Shackleton, Kev Roberts, James, Marc Sanderson and Roz Hunt (now Hobley).

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with James afterwards commenting: “I hope you told them it was a waste of time. With their trifling little budget, we could barely make a sausage roll for that!”

James puts initial success with Greggs down to coming up with some very straightforward, simple ways of getting some profile in the local media. He recalls: “We said, right, ok, the thing that will work with 50 shops, mostly in Greater Birmingham, is regular competitions in local media, such as product giveaways, half price deals, buy one, get one free (BOGOF’s, as they were known) on signature products like sausage rolls with some classy, mouth-watering photographs.

“We had to have good media contacts and I had a great executive called Mairead Ritchie to help me on the account. The other thing we did was to look for a good news story every quarter that we could get some bigger profile with. We had to look hard, not because there weren’t the stories, but because they were hidden from plain

sight. Often clients don’t realise what great stories they have.

“We once discovered there were 13 women pregnant in the office or factory at Braggs (then the name of what became Greggs in the Midlands) and so we did a story about the Baker’s Dozen of staff all with a bun in the oven! The result? A front page feature in The Sun which represented priceless image building profile for the client.”

So impressed were Greggs with this national coverage in Britain’s most popular newspaper that before long James was approached by other divisions. More work resulted so that eventually the initial £5,000 fee was worth more than 15 times that in a relationship that extended for more than a decade and saw Greggs develop into one of Britain’s most successful businesses.

Under James’ leadership the company began to function a little differently. He had a desire to take PR to a new level, to protect and promote



## Vital Ingredient

The staff at Greggs were always the magical extra ingredient that made things rise.

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clients' reputations. He focused on seeing Public Relations as a way of managing the complex set of unique relationships that an organisation has with its various publics.

"And that meant that we needed to understand stakeholder analysis, how we were engaging, what the relative weight of stakeholders were in a particular client's business, how we should allocate the budget and how we ought to monitor the efficacy of the different monies we were spending.... that's what it was about, not just an odd PR story that would get some publicity," said James.

Leader kept to the philosophy of delivering results for clients and its thriving relationship with Warwick Castle continued to produce great mutual benefits. In 1997 the Castle opened a new Kingmaker attraction (not to be confused with the steam train extravaganza of Bryan's invention) but a recreation by Madame Tussaud's greatest wax figure modellers of a scene featuring

Warwick the Kingmaker preparing to leave the Castle to do battle in 1471.

The attraction transformed the Castle by opening up areas which had previously been shut to the public and generated thousands of extra visitors a year. Leader hired the actor Robert Hardy to come and play the role of Kingmaker at a special media launch and the enormous media coverage captured the public's imagination and helped the Castle to win a variety of tourism awards.

For Leader, it led to more tourist attractions, such as the Black Country Living Museum and Walsall Illuminations (Britain's second biggest after Blackpool) getting in touch to appoint them as their consultancy.

Leader was indeed going from strength to strength through the mid to late 1990's.

Another key client at this time was the National Boat, Caravan and Outdoor Leisure Show, an annual spring

exhibition at the National Exhibition Centre. It was one of the largest shows held at the NEC with more than 100,000 visitors and Leader was responsible for all the PR.

One year on the opening day, just before the official opening by the late television personality Jill Dando, one of the water features leaked. It was a serious leak. And yet the show opened on time. Although, as James recalls, that was not down to Leader, he was proud that the Leader team managed to keep the press office operating and have all the TV crews lined up with no-one ever knowing about it.

Leader might have been flourishing under James' hand, but he was under substantial personal pressures. Pressure from the responsibility of running Leader single-handedly as Bryan had by now retired, and pressure at home with the cost and responsibility of a growing family. By late 2000 it was clear that Emma wanted to move on. She filed for divorce and a new life. With the relationship faltering and then collapsing, and the fall out from the divorce and protecting the children from it as much as possible, James admits the business was no longer at the forefront of his mind.

"Although I kept the business going with the help of some very loyal staff, including Kev Roberts, Neil Clarke and Marc Sanderson, I had to step back from the business to a considerable extent. I climbed Kilimanjaro in 2001 and then the following year I ran the New York marathon and visited Ground Zero.

Whilst climbing Kili, James witnessed extreme poverty for the first time, saw the devastating impact of AIDS on children's lives and realised that in fact he had little to moan about. The experience stayed with him and when he saw the devastation of Ground Zero the following year, he began considering the

need to set up a charity that might do something to alleviate the imbalance of wealth in our world which he saw as the underlying reason for the catastrophe that was 9/11.

He began seriously to reconsider his role, to think about stepping back a little further from day-to-day responsibilities at Leader. It also led to the establishment of the African Oyster Trust, a charity dedicated to alleviate poverty and sickness in one of the poorest countries in the world – but more of that later. . . .

“All the time I was thinking, what is my vision for Leader, what is my vision for my life? I know what I’ll do, I’ll resign from managing director, I’ll take a big step back, I’ll let other people come forward and I’ll have more time to write books and pursue some of these more philanthropic interests that I’m developing. And provided that these other people do their job well, I’ll still be able to meet my personal obligations. It all went well for a bit and then we lost Warwick Castle.”

The Castle had, like many other tourist attractions, been hit by 9/11. For Leader this was a big loss. Warwick Castle accounted for more than 10 percent of the business. Then, as James recalls, a couple of leads came in and before he knew it, he hadn’t stepped back from the business. In fact, he was right back into it all over again, handling clients at the chalk face.

One of those clients was Blenheim Palace, birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill, home to the 11th Duke and Duchess of Marlborough and the only non-royal, non-episcopal country house in England to hold the title of palace.

Leader was appointed a year ahead (2003) of the tercentenary of the Battle of Blenheim in order to help prepare for the momentous year.

An epic challenge lay ahead. How to publicise and gain momentum and support for the anniversary of the Battle, a great battle for sure but almost no one seemed to know or care about it.



## Living History

Promoting the Battle of Blenheim was one of Leader's most challenging and exciting tasks. It was about making history real.

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“It was part of a series of battles that the Duke of Marlborough won against Louis XIV,” James recalls. “But it’s one of those periods of history that most English people haven’t really got a clue about. If you said, where is Blenheim (well, it doesn’t exist to be fair – it was Blindheim), most people wouldn’t know and nor would they know who John Churchill (the leader of the allied forces at Blenheim and the first Duke) was. They probably wouldn’t know who was on the throne of England at the time, they might know that Louis XIV was French, but they certainly wouldn’t know the significance of any of these victories at all.

“What we therefore suggested was a multi-layered campaign. If the objective was to encourage more visitors, what were they going to see that actually told them anything about the battle? Answer: nothing. So our key recommendation was to devise, conceive and put on a whole Battle of Blenheim exhibition in time for the tercentenary year.”

Another recommendation Leader made was to produce a commemorative book ‘Blenheim and the Churchills’ which was produced by Jarrolds of Norwich, but what really captured everyone’s imagination was the concept of The National History Survey.

“We asked people what they knew about the Battle of Blenheim, but we were also trying to find out what people knew about England’s history in general,” explains James. “For example, we found out that 15 percent of British people were unsure whether Conan the Barbarian was real or fictional and an amazingly high percentage of people didn’t know whether Adolf Hitler was real or not either!

“The survey was carried out in London, Manchester and Bristol and uncovered a shocking lack of knowledge. So appalling were the findings that the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in New York picked up on the statistic about the Holocaust and Nazism. The Duke of Marlborough did a major interview on BBC Radio

4's Today programme and we got lots and lots of coverage. Our assumption that not many people had heard of the Battle of Blenheim was proved to be correct, so we had lots of work to do to stimulate interest and stir up a desire to find out more by visiting Blenheim Palace itself."

As a result of all this activity, visitor numbers in the tercentenary went up by 100,000 or so. This success, combined with the power of the National History Survey - a relatively simple campaign (handled by Leader's Anna Shackleton and Roz Hunt) but with such far reaching impact, led to Leader winning its first national PR Week Award.

It was the time for awards. The following year (2004) James won Midlands PR Consultant of the Year presented by the Institute of Public Relations. It was to reward him for his leadership abilities in heading up his company over so many years. James has always been in many senses a reluctant leader, but he was proud to accept it for his team. Leader's directors went on to win other awards over the years, and James is also proud of them, but nonetheless, like his father, he takes the view that awards need to be kept in perspective.

"Awards are really nice, but I haven't got any time for people going to award ceremonies and patting each other on the back and weeping for joy ... I see no point in that whatsoever," he says, "It's all about the difference that our work can make. PR is often seen as a bit flakey but actually, if you tell the truth well you can do a lot of good. Companies like Greggs for example, employ a lot of people and good PR can certainly help to keep their jobs safe."

It was time for Leader to get bigger and to stop relying so heavily on referral work. James appointed a Business Growth Consultant to help devise a new strategy

which would take Leader substantially forward, doubling the size of the business over the next two or three years. The strategy was to acquire another business.

In 2005, Leader merged with another local PR company that was very well respected. To begin with the merger went extremely well. Clients transferred across and the business increased in size by a third. Leader was getting close to a turnover of £1 million. It was a big step forward. But when the honeymoon period was over, it rapidly became clear that it was not such a compatible pairing.

By the end of 2007, James knew a de-merger was necessary. But in 2008 the economy nose-dived and the deepest recession since the 1930's took its grip on Britain. There was a concern Leader itself would go under. A decision had to be made, so in January 2008 Leader de-merged and, difficult though the decision was, optimism was restored and the business began to pull through.

It was during this de-stabilising period that two significant events occurred in James' private life. In 2006, he got married to Laura whom he'd met at his local church. James' mother was able to see her son remarry but the following year she died after a long illness that she had fought valiantly. Barbara and Bryan had been married for 52 years.

Back at Leader, James was shaken by his experience of the breakdown of the merger. He went to Cranfield University to do a business growth programme as he was concerned his scheme to grow the business hadn't worked out. While on the course, he became aware of cash VAT accounting. Leader had a large lump sum to find, to meet their obligations to the other business, and it was the switch to cash VAT accounting that gave them the liquidity needed at a time when the banks wouldn't lend a penny. But it was a large burden to carry for a while – something he could not have coped with without the loyal support of key colleagues



## Recognition

In 2004 James was delighted to be appointed Midlands PR Person of the year by the Institute of Public Relations.

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Kev Roberts, Marc Sanderson and Neil Clarke.

Having overcome this setback, Leader then had to deal with the credit crunch. Its policy was survival by retrenchment and making sure that longstanding clients continued to be serviced really well. The Linford Construction Group was one of these and executive chairman Mr David Linford offered wise counsel to James at this time. Another key client relationship with Neil Anderson, managing director of Qcom, was also critical. "We did some great work for Qcom around this time," James reported, "totally re-configuring the way the business was branded – name, focus, service offering, logo and descriptor. In our Golden Jubilee year Qcom Outsourcing is our most long standing client – we've worked with Neil and his team since the early 90's."

In addition there were property difficulties due to excess office space, which had to be negotiated with the landlord to avoid further expense and outlay. All of these issues,

culminated in James rethinking the business.

His new philosophy had been forming and with his team he developed a series of values: courage, a belief in team working, a belief in delivering the WOW factor and having a passion for what they do.

James was keen to develop his staff, unlocking people's innate talents (or their 'gifts' as he likes to call them) by the way he worked with them and the way the business invested in their training and development.

"Take the example of Neil Clarke who joined us fresh from temping at a printers having completed a degree in design and who is now our director of online and design work. I could point to Ben Taylor, who again came fresh out of Art School and working alongside Neil, is now a fully-fledged and gifted designer. I could relate the success of Marc Sanderson who joined us as an account manager, and who is now a Chartered Marketeer

and runs the marketing consultancy side of things at Leader. Tom Grocott, who joined with a few months experience and now has a very senior position in an international PR Consultancy and Amy Kiernan who came in as a senior account executive, did a brilliant job on a range of clients and now runs her own consultancy. And look at Kev Roberts. He joined us initially to fill a production role, stayed on to head up our creative output and is now Operations Director with day to day responsibility for all our senior people. Finally, Tracy Taylor came in as my secretary, but now she's our financial controller and she's got all her qualifications.

"Many, many instances of people growing at Leader and although I can be a hard critic I love it when people identify their gifts and we can back them to achieve their full potential," James said.

Despite the difficult economy, there were some great new clients and exciting campaigns for Leader during this time. PR director, Gerry Vincent, recalls the major campaign to publicise the magazine industry, which was facing huge competition from online and digital publications. It was a very clever campaign, and beautifully simple.

"In 2008 Leader launched The Great Cover Debate, which was aimed at finding the best ever magazine front cover. It really ignited people's imagination," Gerry recalls.

"We asked people and publishers to submit covers for consideration. We had over 100 submissions which we asked industry experts to judge and come up with a shortlist of 16. The public were able to vote on these through the publishers' own channels. Suddenly we had a lot of people buying into the idea."

The shortlisted covers included the first ever issue of The Face from 1980, Vivienne Westwood dressed to look like Margaret Thatcher on the cover of Tatler, a satirical sketch from Private Eye, Victoria and David Beckham's wedding on the cover of OK magazine and Kate Moss on the front of Vogue.

"We had around 12,000 votes – and the winner was the Radio Times with a picture of a Dalek going across Westminster Bridge. We got a brilliant piece of follow-up coverage in the Radio Times, which was by far and away the biggest selling magazine title in the country at the time.

We took a new photograph of a girl reading that copy of the Radio Times on Westminster Bridge with a Dalek looking over her shoulder. The winning title was unveiled at one of the mainline London railway stations because it had a W.H. Smiths – and we got a Dalek there too! There were lots of people on the concourse taking pictures so it created a heck of a buzz.

"The value of the coverage ran into millions of pounds," remembers Gerry. One success followed another and in 2012 a new client, based just a few miles away from Leader, zoomed into view, exciting all the petrol heads in the company, including design and online director, Neil Clarke.

"We had an opportunity to pitch for the Heritage Motor Centre, located on the same site as Jaguar Land Rover at Gaydon. On paper it looked like a long shot, but we went ahead with the tender process. At the 'getting to know you' session we found out that there were 21 other companies involved. Much to our delight, we were selected to be in the final three.

"Then we won it and we're now into our third year with them, which is fantastic. It's an amazing collection featuring more than 300 British cars. We tweaked the brand and put the Union flag behind it. Then we went for a retro style, bringing back a feel of the art deco design of the 20's and 30's which has had some great



## Daleks Reign Supreme

'Vote Dalek', the iconic Radio Times front cover from May 2005, was voted the best UK magazine cover of all time, in 'The Great Cover Debate' - a hugely successful Leader PR campaign to support Magazine Week 2008 which was organised by the Periodical Publishers Association.

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results. We knew what style would appeal to the public because of the strategic research undertaken by Barbara Cadd, Leader's consumer PR director. It's a great team effort."

The prestige and pride of the account is tangible, and clearly the relationship is working very well, as Neil describes an email he received from a senior HMC executive who said: "we must have the right product at the right price with excellent marketing and PR - keep up your great work it is helping us move in the right direction and is much appreciated."



## Automotive Family Fun

The Heritage Motor Centre is home to the world's largest collection of British Cars; it boasts nearly 300 cars in its collection and with a packed calendar of automotive shows and events is the go to destination for car enthusiasts and families alike.

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# 5

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## 2013 onwards A Fresh Start

“All of us want to grow. We’ve just got to find the recipe to deliver that, and I think we have found it.” James Holden 2014

Leader moved.

In many respects it moved.

It moved premises in June 2013, to a new barn conversion, Newhouse Farm, in the beautiful Warwickshire countryside just north of Stratford-upon-Avon.

The company moved the way it does business. Critically it introduced a number of new working practices.

James is enthusiastic about them. The directors like them. Most critically so do the clients.

Fusion working was one such practice. Leader wanted to employ all types of media to make communications and campaigns work, effortlessly. It also wanted to provide clients with a seamless way of working across all media whether it be website design, online, print or mobile communications to provide total continuity.

James was also keen to ensure clients continued to receive the best possible level of service. He was tired of seeing



## The Old Stables

Leader's new home in the tiny hamlet of Edstone. It's a great place to be creative.

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PR companies pitch with all their top people, only to assign a relatively junior member of staff to the day to day running once the account is won. At Leader, he wanted leaders to lead. So all accounts became director-led. This meant that when clients met directors at pitches, they could be confident these were really the individuals who would work on their accounts. It provided assurance of quality and continuity. It's been a unique selling point for Leader ever since.

Leader's directors have been described as 'real human beings' by marketing director, Marc Sanderson. They are fully behind the ethos of Leader, which Marc encapsulates perfectly: "It's considered, it's smart, it's incisive, it's effective."

Kev Roberts describes Leader as: "Having changed a lot since the late '90's. when I joined. I remember the first thing I did when I came was to re-decorate the creative studio in bright, vibrant colours. It's all

very well creating great strategies for clients but Leader's also about creativity and designs that make you feel excited. I really like it when we come up with a concept that makes you stand up or a design that just looks beautiful.

Leader is also moving forwards with its growth.

"We are looking to at least treble in size in the next 2 to 4 years," explains James. "To facilitate this we've implemented a new style of working – an associate model – which allows us to bring in individuals with strengths and talents for particular projects. This has bolstered the skills base and resources of Leader immensely as well as making financial sense."

The 50th anniversary of Leader in 2015 will be marked in many ways. The business is sponsoring the Solihull Chamber of Commerce as a patron, so will be keeping company with the likes of Ove Arup and Jaguar Land Rover, who are also patrons.

The Golden Anniversary is also the year in which James will actually divide his time between Leader and other interests. Following a long period of being drawn to more fully fulfill his philanthropic nature, he will begin training for part time Anglican ministry. His journey, his lessons learnt along the way, all pointed to this path being chosen for James and whilst Leader will always be important the opportunities for others to grow and develop are exciting.

2015 is also the 10th anniversary of the charity mentioned on page 74, which James founded but for which he keeps a low profile – The African Oyster Trust. It flowed out of his experiences in Africa after climbing Kilimanjaro, the poverty he saw and the desire to do more to promote good over evil. Through a friend he heard about the work being done in The Gambia by an American woman, Kira Dalton.

“I told her I’d been looking for an opportunity to make a difference in Africa. She said why don’t you come out to Gambia, see the situation on the ground. I went out, taking some money with me that we’d been given from a local fundraiser, bought some medicines and visited one of the schools supported by Kira. I then thought the best thing I could do to help Kira, was to set up a Trust, a charity to which some of the profits from Leader would be donated.”

Those profits were dented for a while, paying off the de-merger settlement, then the credit crunch which affected Leader although not as badly as others. But the thought of being able to benefit The African Oyster Trust was part of James’ regained desire to make Leader grow. Others are also donating and now the Trust has been able to build and fund five pre-schools, two hospitals and a clinic. The Gambia has no State provision of nursery schools, before the age of seven. It has no welfare system to provide health care so the Trust is plugging a gap there too. The vision of the Trust is to reduce poverty and suffering in former British Commonwealth countries.

James isn't comfortable to overly promote the charity, but where it has been spotted by clients, perhaps as a reference on the back of a Leader Christmas card one year, it has had a deep effect. Some former clients have become involved. A school was named after the wife of one, who carried out a lot of fundraising before she died. Another has become a trustee and asked that his retirement gift be to build one of the schools in The Gambia.

So Leader reaches its 50th year and The African Oyster Trust marks its 10th anniversary too.

Built on the hard work and vision of a man from the Staffordshire town of Smethwick who in 1965, aged 34, had the vision and dedication to create a company with longevity and integrity.

Bryan was the opener of deals, James was the closer. Father and son complemented each other. As Bryan stepped back so James could take Leader forward with the same

solid principles but reformed and repositioned to reflect current times. "The thread of Leader's whole history is telling a story," maintains Marc Sanderson, marketing director. Leader's story is one of unforeseen success and growth, of surviving mergers and economic downturns, of finding staff and keeping them, of finding new ways to work, to ensure that individuals give their best and customers, like the Heritage Motor Museum, are continually delighted.

The people within the company are its strength, it's what makes Leader special.

"People buy from people," Bryan said. And Leader continues to have special people today. People who care passionately about what they do and what's important for their customers.

Marc Sanderson, sums it up: "I love the work. The whole thing, the discipline of it, the mental rigour of it, the satisfaction of doing it well and the client noticing (although sometimes what's more important for



## A Place To Grow

A typical classroom in The Gambia that the AOT has helped local people to build, maintain and teach at.

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“ It’s a time to reflect on the journey already travelled. To contemplate what has been achieved on the way and to see how people and events impact on the pursuit of success.

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me is to know I’ve done it well...) and going back and tweaking something again to make it even better.

“I quite often find myself in the minutiae of website code thinking, why am I changing this, no one’s ever going to see it. But it matters to me. It’s like polishing the back of the cabinet, the underside of the drawer. Leader is a company that always polishes the back of the cabinet and the underside of the drawer.”

As Leader marks its 50th year, it’s a time to reflect on the journey already travelled. To contemplate what has been achieved on the way and to see how people and events impact on the pursuit of success. Then it’s time to move forwards and look to the future - maybe even with one of Bryan’s star jumps!

# Epilogue

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By James Holden

## The Birth of Fusion and Generation Y

In order to deliver success as a relatively small business we have to continually change in order to stay the same – a real consultancy dedicated to delivering great work to our clients - and we're ensuring this happens for all our clients via our new Director Led, Fusion orientated service".

In 2013 we took stock of the marketing world around us and we realised everything was changed. Rather than simply looking at what other agencies were doing - or what marketing in general was doing - we knew it was essential to look at the bigger picture, to look at the nature of our society in order that Leader align its services with client needs in the Generation Y years of the first decades of the third millennium.

A number of key phenomena were apparent:

### **All the rules have changed**

Thanks to Tim Berners-Lee (the inventor of the worldwide web) all the rules have changed and they continue to change. At breathtaking speed we can send vast amounts of data instantly, constantly and globally. The digital revolution has transformed politics, business and culture as it reaches into all the dimensions of our lives - disrupting and reinventing our personal and business landscape at a relentless pace.

### **The end of big money solutions**

Such upheaval has resulted in an end to the rule that it's always the 'financially big' solutions that win the day – throwing money at a challenge just doesn't cut it like it used to, particularly for the growing numbers of Challenger brands. Bloggers rather than the established news outlets break the news, musicians bypass record labels and become YouTube sensations and 20-something tech entrepreneurs destabilize industry giants and become billionaires.

### **Brand behaviour has changed**

We expect more from the brands we love. We expect them to be good citizens. We expect them to be honest and transparent. And if what they say and do is out of sync with each other we as consumers switch them off almost instantly. Hypocrisy is swiftly unveiled and consumer punishment meted out globally via social every minute of every hour, 24/7.

## **The New Marketing Challenge**

We then asked ourselves, what does this mean for our clients? What type of challenges will they face moving forward?

### **Marketing has more options than ever before**

Marketing communications has become much more complicated and the strategies and tactics required for success far less obvious. Only a decade ago most marketing communications strategies looked much the same – they presented similar media options – with the only differentiation between them being at the fringes. This has all changed – everything and anything is now possible.



## The Current Pride

Left to right: Marc Sanderson, Barbara Cadd, George Barbrook, Neil Clarke, Kev Roberts, James and Gerry Vincent.

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### **Experimentation Costs have fallen**

The cost of marcoms experimentation has dramatically fallen. It used to be very costly to test run concepts and ideas in both time and money – but no longer. In fact, constant experimentation to stay ahead of the curve is essential. Stand still and, in reality, you’ve moving backwards.

### **Boardroom Solutions**

We also realised that the new media and technological solutions available to marketing teams the world over meant marketing communications now holds many of the answers to the big issues boardroom personnel are facing – such as channels to market, reputation management, on and off line sales strategies ....the list goes on.

We realised that offering advice in such areas is going to be an even bigger responsibility than before – agencies are now truly offering strategically profound solutions to their clients.

Worryingly however, we also saw many agencies still structured around junior teams with very little senior experience driving ideas and account management – it seemed senior principals at many agencies only got involved periodically when the account was up for revue or there was a major issue.

As an agency, we realised this was a major opportunity to see a new way of structuring our business.

And that’s precisely what we’ve done - offering two key ingredients for all accounts;

- i. All clients benefit from a hands-on director-led service. This will ensure strategically sound, experience driven strategies.



## For Royal Approval

Ben Taylor and Kev Roberts together designing a medal commissioned by the Royal College of Organists for HM The Queen.

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- ii. All solutions will be delivered via our unique delivery mechanism – Fusion – where we will bring together our talent hub, a team from across key marketing disciplines specifically to deliver cost effective and creative solutions to challenges.

## What's in a name?

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According to the Oxford dictionary Fusion (n) is defined as: the blending of different things into one.

The concept of 'Fusion' is perfect for describing how we do things now, because we're about the combining of a number of different marketing communications elements into one coherent and complimentary whole (delivered through a senior director) that brings about real life solutions.

In a way it's what we've been doing as a Challenger in pursuit of success for fifty years, but it looks and feels very different. We should never actually believe we've totally succeeded, because once you think you've made it you become complacent. Success for us is really about momentum and looking forward to a future built on the platform of the past.

I was looking through a book of my old poems the other day and there was one I wrote when we used to live in a lovely house with river frontage to the Avon. It was all about summer days when I used to take the kids boating on the river. We never knew what would unfold on our journey and although the river was always different it was also, very reassuringly always the same.



[www.leader.co.uk](http://www.leader.co.uk)





## About the Author

As a BBC journalist, Rachel Hicks has been telling stories for over 20 years.

Leader's story was a fascinating deviation from news bulletins, film scripts and press releases.

It's prompted the start of her first novel.

Rachel has a daughter, partner and spaniel and lives in Oxfordshire.

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