

CASE STUDY

Hadland Care Group

Hadland Care Group's re-branding has grown the business, improved efficiency and is now providing a solid platform for future growth in a competitive and highly regulated market

Background

Hadland Care Group was set up in 1990 when Founder and Managing Director Cheryl Hadland responded to a lack of childcare facilities for her children by opening her first Tops Day Nursery in Poole. The company now operates branches across Dorset, Somerset and Hampshire.

In 1998, Hadland developed a second strand to the business - providing training for care staff. In 2005, it opened its first residential care home specialising in the care of people with dementia and then, three years later, its second.

Today, Hadland Care Group employs 360 people and has in 2009 turned over more than £6m. Moving forward, it has ambitious plans to grow the business further by working with new partners to develop further sites in local hospitals, colleges and privately.

Problem

At the time Tops Day Nurseries accessed the Design Council's Designing Demand service in 2007, it had grown fast and was looking after around 1,200 children per day. One of the keys to its success was flexibility. Tops centres won customers by opening outside the normal 8am-5pm hours to suit parents' different work patterns, and by offering innovative charging arrangements broken down to the quarter-hour rather than half-day.

However, Cheryl Hadland realised the business's identity - a logo featuring the image of a Victorian toy - was out of step with the increasingly competitive and regulated care sector.

"We had a very old logo designed by me and a printer 18 years ago - a time when I could fill all my nursery places using a Yellow Pages ad, but times had changed," she explains. "I knew it needed a redesign because the business had grown much more professional over the years. I asked the printer to do it, but the result didn't really have anything going for it and we wouldn't have improved our position by using it."

Hadland had sought advice previously from Business Link and did so again. She was told about the Design Council's Designing Demand service and introduced to Design Associate Kathryn Hughes who says the immediate problems were clear.

"The existing identity covered all three parts of the business, but each was actually quite different," Hughes explains. "The brand was being used inconsistently across the group - managers were producing materials with different fonts and layouts creating an inconsistent brand experience. Most importantly, the business would find it hard without a proper identity to fulfil the plans it had for future growth."

Response

Hughes worked with Hadland to identify the requirements for a design project to update the business's branding. This began with a workshop to analyse the company's background, marketplace and future ambitions. Hughes then worked closely with Hadland to produce a design brief, select a design agency and oversee the design development process.

From the outset, the experience exceeded Hadland's expectations.

"I thought it would be just about the logo, but it turned out to be much more," she explains. "Working on the design brief with Kathryn, we looked at how the business perceived itself and what its voice was. This brought about a big change from the childlike 'play' feeling we had before to an identity that better conveyed our professionalism."

An early decision was made to retain the Tops name for the day nurseries as this part of the business already enjoyed a strong market position and the name was well-known. However, it was clear that Tops was not a name appropriate for care homes, and that using Tops for the training business might dissuade other nurseries from using it to train their staff.

Hughes recommended three design agencies to pitch for the business. Winchester-based design agency Bond & Coyne was appointed.

The design team created a redesign of Tops Day Nurseries' identity and three new brand identities - Reside Care Homes, Aspire Training Team, and Hadland Care Group as the umbrella brand for the whole business. The web site was redesigned by the group's existing web designers Parenta, and stationery, brochures, signage and brand guidelines for staff and suppliers completed the £100,000 project.

"The design team was dynamic and inspirational and came up with ideas that were really unexpected," Hadland says. "For instance, they saw our managers were selling nursery places to parents in an environment just like a typical office. We de-cluttered and redecorated every office as well as building entrances to Bond & Coyne's specifications."

Impact

The new branding was introduced with a phased roll-out across each of the company's premises throughout 2008 - the year Hadland celebrated its eighteenth year in business. Open days to celebrate both developments were held at each site to generate interest in the new look, and local PR activities

were created to complement this - for example, promotions with local press and radio.

"The immediate impact was parents saying how professional we looked, and we certainly saw an uplift in enquiries," Hadland says.

Looking back, she is in little doubt the re-branding provided a solid platform for the business to weather the recession. "2008 proved our to be our best year so far, and 2009 went on to be even better - quite an achievement given we achieved this during the credit crunch" she adds. "Tops Day Nurseries in hospital locations increased their revenues - more than covering the dip experienced by branches based on retail sites."

A number of internal benefits of the re-branding are also still being felt.

Administrative efficiency increased as sharper branding created clearer areas of accountability for income streams - an effect that was soon visible in the group accounts. "Since the Designing Demand project ended, each business division has moved forward to clearly establish itself as a separate entity," Hadland adds.

The re-branding has also provided a boost to staff pride in the business making staff feel their professionalism was recognised and valued.

Subsequent developments have included the appointment of a full-time marketing manager to consolidate the growth in the business the project has helped generate and the opening of a new nursery - Hadland's eleventh - on the Isle of Wight in 2009.

"The whole experience was a revelation," Hadland comments. "While we've had no immediate need to do any further projects with the design team we are still in touch, and the approach and understanding we learned is now integral to what we do within the business on a day by day basis."

Moving forward, Hadland Care Group intends to open a new nursery each year, though expansion will be limited geographically to an area within two hours of the company's home town, Bournemouth.

"With capital to put down on new building development harder to come by in the current climate, the plan is to work with partners – hospitals, colleges or for example, where Hadland's expertise can sustain existing nurseries that might otherwise be shut down; and projects with property developers where our management experience can take their projects through to full occupancy of their sites" she adds. "The re-branding has undoubtedly helped us build a solid platform for this growth."

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