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2022 DBA Effectiveness Awards speech

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Awards speech

Delivered by Deborah Dawton, CEO, DBA
At the DBA Design Effectiveness Awards Ceremony 30 June 2022.

Congratulations Nathan and Samantha.

And so to my speech. Why did I choose to shift it to the end of the ceremony today as opposed to the start? Well, that's because of the story you've just heard (Billson's Grand Prix winner). You just heard about a business that has made a significant impact on a town's economy, visitation, and employment in just three years.

Interestingly, they cited in their case study another business like theirs that had a seven year start on them – a cordials business that too found its original recipes – but Billson's point to their brand and the design of their packaging as **the** factors that enabled them to outpace their competitor in just three years.

This puts Billson's in the top 3 of employers in Beechworth, Victoria, and half of their performance happened during Covid.

Most governments dream of this sort of success for their small businesses. In the UK three fifths of employment is down to small businesses – they are the engine of most economies so it's no wonder governments are fixated on the growth of these businesses.

Billson's increased employment from 2 to 28 people in three years. That's a profound impact on a local community. That's a bunch of people that didn't have to go to Melbourne for work. Billson's restored the buildings which presented them with the opportunity to offer a better visitor experience. That brings more money into the local economy. 2 and half years after launching, 1000 quality retailers stocked their products. That drives profit into those businesses, not to mention the impact that increased volumes would have on Billson's suppliers. Think of the positive impact of bigger orders for the myriad of small producers that supply Billson's with fruit for example.

Billson's also knew they had to grow their brand to enable innovation and growth by the end of Y2. Their commitment to growth is, and will continue to have far reaching impacts way beyond the ones that were actually included in this case study. I don't know what you call that ripple effect of impact that travels out from one business doing well into the all the businesses that supply it, and the prosperity that drives into the local community and economy? What I do know is that this case study doesn't cover that ripple effect.

And I'm not suggesting that design did all this. Billson's still had to have great salespeople, a great production line manager, a raw materials purchaser, great packers, great recipes at their core, but I'm guessing that their other competitor had all of these things too. The missing ingredient for the other business was design, Billson's used design strategically and creatively to drop this brand into the market in exactly the right spot.

I often talk about design being the yeast in the business mix. Picture if you will a table and on it, the ingredients you need to make a loaf of bread. The smallest ingredient on that table is the yeast, but we all know it must go in at the right time to take effect.

And it struck me, when I was pulling this together, that most small business, and even most medium sized businesses can't get all the ingredients on the table before they start thinking strategically about their positioning and brand in the market. They don't have designers in their businesses. They have all the other ingredients, sales, marketing, production and so on.

But nine times out of ten, the founders, or people who buy these businesses don't have years of experience in design and branding.

And this is where I think governments go wrong. They're busy trying to create the environment within which businesses can flourish, not realising like the businesses themselves, that the yeast in the business mix, design, is missing from the table. What's the point of a government export strategy for small businesses, if those small businesses haven't considered their brand and positioning in new markets.

I'm not advocating that small and medium sized businesses suddenly start employing designers. No. The role of small and medium sized design businesses is to plug that gap at each, and every small and medium sized business table. You need to be talking about what you do in terms of the impact you could have in a business if you were party to the strategic conversation, and not just the creative execution of a strategy that you haven't read or had anything to do with.

Billson's competitor will have a strategy, I'm sure of it. But it's not one that was touched by designers, and if you leave design to the point before the product flies out the door, as a business you're underutilising design. I'm sure you'll still shift product, but nowhere nearly as successfully as Billson's do. And if you're designers working on these types of briefs where you're just being asked to get the product out of the door, then you're underselling design's role in business, and you and your client will probably never win a design effectiveness award.

So, why am I telling you this today? Well, you've just invested an hour of time listening to some amazing stories. I want you to dig into them and learn from them. Read the Billson's case study. Read the case studies that don't sit in your area of expertise. Get yourself familiar with the language of design effectiveness. Because, if there's a recession looming, as designers we need to be exercising the full force of our strategic and creative abilities to get businesses through the next three years.

Government needs to be advocating for design. Please let's talk about how you could be using these case studies to wake businesses up to the potential of design, so that it's understood to be the yeast in the business mix. Imagine the Billson impacts on just a fraction of our SME community in the UK. Exposing the CEOs of these small businesses to design in this way will prepare them for a career in industry, and we want design aware CEOs in charge of our global brands.

And to the global brands that do this so well? Please continue to set the example and be generous in sharing you're your stories through the DBA and other business associations. Please talk about the role of design in your organisations, and how it is that you drive design added value into your brands and businesses.

That brings us to the end of today's ceremony.....

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