



Viewpoint Mike Smith

Using photographs to develop the ambience of a business can influence your relationship with that brand

I was sitting in my local Costa Coffee in Luton, Bedfordshire, sipping on a medium latte, taking a break from the usual Saturday turmoil of the Smith household. I then paused to scrutinise the photos on the wall a little more closely. They fell into two different categories: street and product. The product shots were unsurprisingly macro shots of coffee machines and drinks, generally finished to a high standard of competency and wouldn't be out of place in a brochure. The street shots were all on location in, what I assume is, Italy, and comprised buildings, waiters, windows and customers. These pictures were generally well composed but tonally quite flat, and were not captured at the optimal time of day.

In terms of presentation the pictures were large prints in highly visible locations with large mounts to draw attention to them. In fact, at some Costa locations, the environmental shots are designed to fill entire panels 'wrapping around' the customer. It made me wonder whether the photos were bought 'off the shelf', commissioned as a 'one off' or deliberately mediocre.

Walk into a Leon restaurant (if you're in London) and the interior is styled to be both Mediterranean and New York apartment from the moment you enter. However, if you look closely, the ethical foundations on which the company is built are pushed, particularly with the

cookbooks and family photos. These, I assume, are copies of the original founders' family photos dating to the 1970s and are, in contrast to the street and product shots in Costa, classic point-and-click. The images are relatively poor quality, with that now nostalgic yellowing of the colour dyes in the old print film, but 'authentic' in the sense that you feel you are witnessing a private moment in someone else's life. The same styling exudes from the walls of any Frankie and Benny's restaurant you might walk into. Unlike Leon's small selection, F&B is plastered in photos dating back to a 1950s Italian-American family business. This, however, belies the fact that they opened their first store in Leicester in 1995!

Back in Luton there are two restaurants that use environmental photography to play on the industrial heritage of the town. The Brache had a series of photos that were taken in March 2002 when the Vauxhall car plant ceased production – sadly, with a refit of the restaurant these have now been removed and I don't have a record of the photographer. They are beautiful black & white portraits and wide shots that evoke the end of an era. This is coupled with pictures of the Hat Factory, showcasing the earlier main hat industry in the town, which peaked in the 1800s.

We are all too familiar with the large volume and short shelf life of the Instagram-esque photo or the slick advertising in glossy magazines. Until my visit to Costa Coffee that morning the sheer range of photos used to develop the ambience of a business had passed me by. These are essential elements in the branding of a business, and whether you think they are cynical (the UK Costa franchise is run by Whitbread), honest (is that the Vincent family?) or historically authentic (Hat Factory), they form a backdrop on which your imagination can paint an emotional response to your relationship with the brand.

Mike Smith is a London-based wedding and portrait photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk



Product or location photography help businesses create ambience and branding

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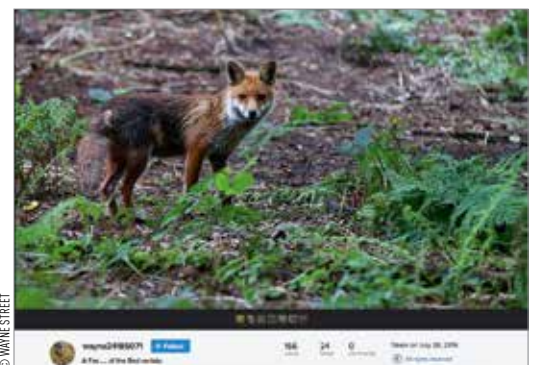
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