

Richard Seymour considers this to be a classic Smith & Milton trait. Now one of Europe's leading product design companies, Seymour Powell started up a few years after Smith & Milton and the two companies' paths have crossed on several occasions. "There's something very reverential and pure about their approach," he reflects. "It's not knock-off or [he almost spits the word] *retro*. It's much more powerful than that. It's based on a genuine understanding of the past. Brand restoration is an interesting term for it. To some degree, we're involved in the same thing. But then we're also in the demolition business. Sometimes you have to know when to chuck everything out and start from scratch."

In some cases, starting from scratch is the only option. The new brand launch can be one of the trickiest projects to tackle. Brett Moore (née Haggerty) remembers working on the launch of a new financial product in 1988: a cashless payment system that was intended to become as widely accepted as the likes of Visa. "Three banks got together to launch this thing: Midland, NatWest and Royal Bank of Scotland. Smith & Milton was asked to come up with the name and design, and then present it to all three banks. It was quite a horrendous process. In the end, the name and mark were based on a simple idea about money moving from one account to another. Then it was all about colours, rather like designing a flag. You couldn't use orange, you couldn't use red. There was a very analytical process of elimination."

The result was Switch, one of the most instantly recognisable marks of recent years. The brand was rapidly absorbed into the public consciousness, until almost everyone seemed to know what it stood for, even when you took the name away. It was a particularly satisfying achievement given the amount of restrictions and client sensitivities involved in the original brief. But then Smith & Milton is familiar with an equally disconcerting phenomenon at the other end of the briefing scale: the blank sheet of paper.

That was more or less all there was to go on when two entrepreneurs, Patrick Folkes and Harry Cragoe, approached Smith & Milton in 1994, explaining that they'd discovered a great new fruit drink in California and wanted to launch it over here. Harry Cragoe recalls how the relationship with Smith & Milton developed. "At no point did we really give them a formal brief – it was more a series of random conversations. We talked about how we liked the idea of using people's names to give the product some personality. Ben and Jerry's was a cult brand in America at the time, but completely unknown over here. We thought we could do something similar. For some reason, the names Pete and Johnny were floating around in our heads. We had an image of them as these two individuals roving the planet, having a good time and experiencing new things. Smith & Milton liked the



ABOVE A standard for the debit card age. Probably our most viewed and most unsung job. 1988



THIS PAGE Following the cash-crazy years of one new financial product after another, a second generation of NatWest communication saw the bank trim its offer down to half a dozen basic and understandable services. The pared down covers suggested the content should be equally succinct. Discovering that no one actually read the information from start to finish, we developed a 'speed reading' layout that directed the reader to what was relevant for them. This vending machine-style communication was a precursor to the coming web age. 1994

company's third managing partner in the autumn of 1982 signalled a level of ambition that was rare among Smith & Milton's contemporaries. Richard Seymour remembers noting it with interest. "There was something very attractive about them taking on this financial entrepreneur as a partner. I remember Dick [Powell] and I found it quite intoxicating: this idea of having a business whizz to help you grow the thing."

As Howard remembers, it took a while for them to adjust to the demands of running a more serious business. Accustomed to dealing primarily with creative issues, they were now faced with the day-to-day problems of hiring, firing and balancing the books. A few months after Jonathan's arrival, Howard recalls going away for a management weekend, billed as a chance for the three partners to discuss the strategic direction of the business, away from the everyday concerns of the studio. "As it turned out, we spent three days agonising over whether to fire this PA we had recently hired. None of us were used to making these kinds of decisions and, if the verdict was to let her go, no one wanted to be the person to tell her. As it turned out, we got a call from the studio on the Monday explaining that the PA in question had just been asked to mail out some important transparencies to a client. It was a fairly straightforward assignment but, for some reason, she chose to staple the address label to the envelope, ruining its contents in the process. We decided to bite the bullet there and then."

As things developed, Jonathan took over primary responsibility for the financial and administrative side of the business, while Howard and Jay concentrated on the creative product. It was a formula that proved extremely effective. When Jonathan first joined, Smith & Milton's turnover stood at around £100,000. It subsequently doubled every year for the next five years, so he and the rest of the management team were clearly doing something right. Jonathan himself is self-deprecating about the extent of his contribution. "My position was essentially to keep the team happy day-to-day, instil systems, make sure they all worked and then be wheeled out to get clients drunk at rugby matches. Which I was really quite effective at." In fact, Jonathan played a major role in transforming Smith & Milton from a small creative hotshop into a heavyweight design business, complete with all the support staff you'd expect to find at any credible advertising agency. As Jonathan sees it, this was the strategy in a nutshell: to become a big business by behaving like one. "I always thought it was important to give off the aura of being a company that had some scale and depth and it worked very well for us. It meant clients weren't frightened to give us more work, which can often be a problem when you're small. Clients may love what you do, but they'll always be worried about overloading you."

RIGHT La difference between Sauce Citron and Lemon Sauce. Whilst entirely appropriate for Sharwoods, the market and the age, the introduction of the Matisse-inspired brushstroke inspired a generation of freestyle copycats. Ten years later, someone invented Photoshop and the circus moved on. 1983





THIS SPREAD We took a call from JWT asking if we could help with the sign-off on some ads for Rowntree. It turned out they were dropping the 'Mackintosh' part and required a new typestyle. When we pointed out to the assembled Rowntree board members the ramifications this would have for every piece of communication they used, their jaws dropped. What we didn't know was that Nestlé was in hot pursuit and that a robust defence was called for. Following a reluctant sale, Rowntree graciously claimed that we helped to add a further £350m to the sale price. But we can't help thinking it was a sad day for York when the Swiss eventually marched in.

what was to come at WCRS. “There’s a huge difference. I was floundering around for months. Advertising is just bigger: bigger budgets, bigger egos, bigger lifestyles. People who work in design are essentially nice people, whereas in advertising they often live up to the stereotype of crazed egomaniacs. It’s an incredibly aggressive environment – very sexually charged. Everyone has a sordid tale to tell about some workplace fling or other. I’m not saying these things don’t go on in design as well. But if it happens at Smith & Milton, they tend to do the decent thing and get married.”

Rupert managed to adjust to this strange new world and soon found himself managing £3 million accounts single-handedly. But it was all happening at the expense of anything resembling a normal life and something eventually had to give. Rupert packed it all in and spent two years at Cordwainers College in Hackney. In the course of his studies, he found time to take a motorbike to Italy and visit as many shoe factories as would see him, eventually landing a full-time post with a leading designer in Bologna. Having honed his craft, he left to form his own company and recently opened his first store in Mayfair. It’s all a far cry from managing the Somerfield account at Smith & Milton.

Rupert points out that shoe design is a business that works on a very different dynamic. “There are very few independent shoe designers around and they can be based more or less anywhere in the world. It’s centred on a series of buyers’ shows that you have to attend, where the likes of Prada and Gucci will spend their shoe budget for the year. Your aim is to get a share of that pot. For the rest of the year, you could be working from Venezuela or anywhere else. Design is very much London-centric, clustered around the clients. It’s a completely different model.”

Perhaps this goes back to the small world problem. There may be plenty of graphic designers out there, but the best ones inevitably end up moving in tightly defined circles. It’s a business driven by a relatively small group of individual talents, whose interests occasionally combine or collide. In the best instances, people stay with you for a decade or more, becoming part of the defining spirit of the company as it changes over time. On other occasions, people find their interests overlap for a couple of years and then diverge, sometimes dramatically. Having spent 25 years acting as a revolving door for some of the industry’s brightest talent, Smith & Milton is more than happy to embrace that state of affairs. It finds itself at the centre of an intriguing and ever-expanding network of contacts, each one linked by no more than a couple of degrees of separation. It’s a sobering thought, especially if you owe them money.



ABOVE We have an ongoing affection for mews property. This was our first real studio. Turnchapel Mews SW4. 1982-84

BELOW & LEFT The client at Allied Breweries put a recyclable bottle of Grolsch on the table and challenged, “match that”. We went back in time to reinvent a bottle that you might have dug up in the back garden. We rediscovered how to make the ebonite ‘Tizer stopper’ that hadn’t been around for 30 years and a bottle so dense in glass that the manufacturers were both concerned and puzzled at our joy over the wobbly glass flow.

THE DUTCH BIER HOBEC LAUNCHED IN 1984.



brand in its own right. Smith & Milton struck up a relationship with him early on, which continued when he moved to Woolworths to oversee a similar transformation of their own-brand lines.

By the end of 1985, turnover was hovering around the £750,000 mark, with a fee income of £400,000 and a team of around 22 very happy people. A whole media industry was also beginning to form around the design business, with early titles such as *Direction* and *Creative Review* complemented by the arrival of *Design Week* in 1986. Smith & Milton perfected a slick PR operation and barely a week went by without another positive story in the press. Their next office move certainly turned a few heads, as the company relocated to palatial studios on the King’s Road. The location couldn’t have been more desirable and the rent couldn’t have been much higher, but turnover was rocketing and there was a string of new work stretching far into the foreseeable future. Smith & Milton was racking up design awards from around the world and a level of self-esteem to match. Even the arrival of Black Monday in 1987 failed to halt the momentum. Fuelled by a mixture of confidence, creative flair, good fortune and plenty of hard work, the company continued to prosper as the eighties turned into the nineties. And then everything changed.

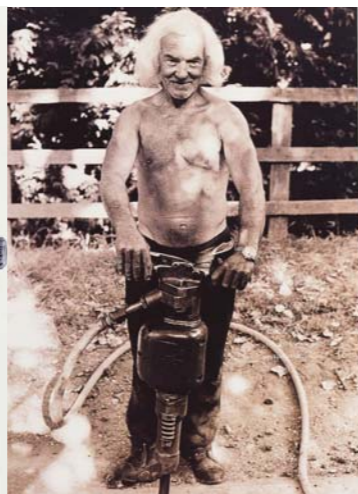
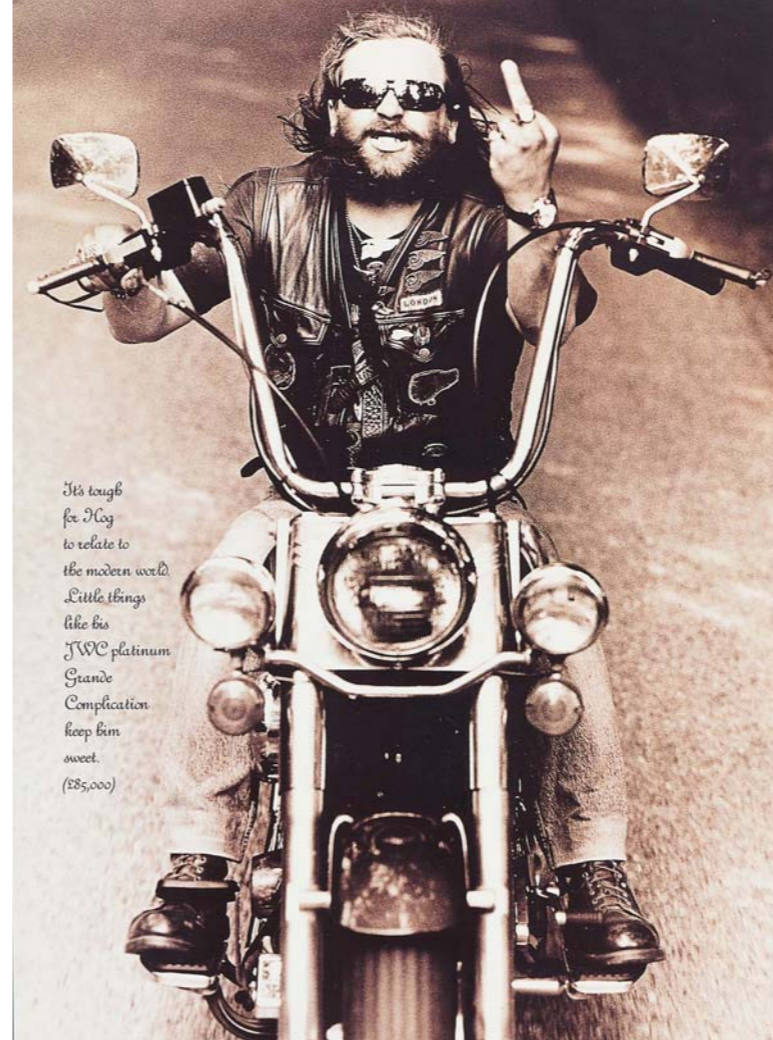
It was on returning to work after the Christmas break in January 1991 that the management team first felt trouble brewing. The forecast for the month was in the region of £300,000, but the work somehow got stuck in the pipeline. In fact, by the end of the month, they had billed just £70,000. There were reassuring murmurings about how this was all down to the economic effects of the first Gulf War – things would get back to normal soon enough. But February carried on in the same vein, as did March and April. For a business with 60 staff and very expensive offices, this was unsustainable and, frankly, terrifying. Smith & Milton was already damaged below the water line.

As the recession kicked in, clients decimated their marketing budgets, the landlord doubled the rent and the bank halved the overdraft. Businesses were going to the wall every other day, including Michael Peters in 1990. Eventually, after a long and excruciating battle, Smith & Milton Limited was forced into administration in October 1992. The founding partners faced personal bankruptcy and were only given a reprieve when the landlords, who had just imposed the rent rise, went into administration themselves. Despite the scorn of their detractors, Howard and Jay were eventually able to buy back the Smith & Milton name from the receivers and start over, initially as Smith & Milton Associates and later as Smith & Milton Original.

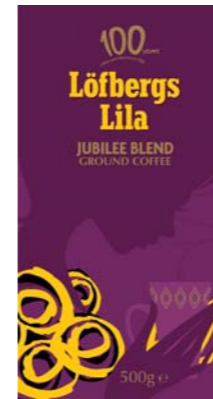
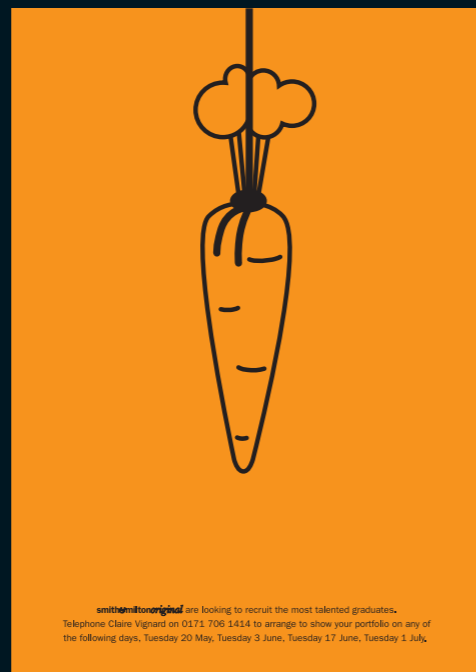
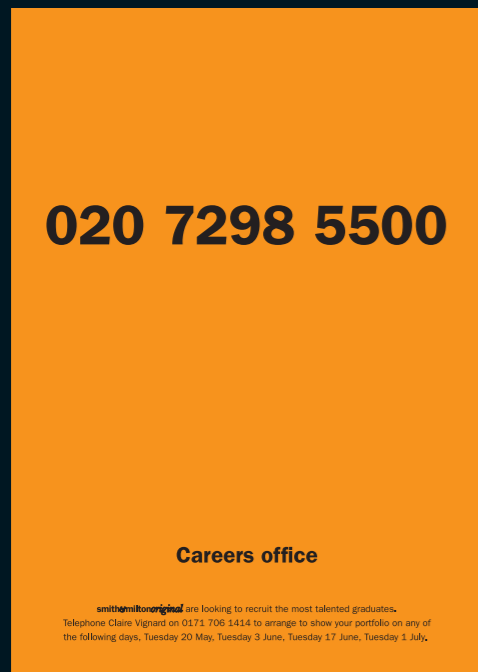
By the beginning of 1993, there was still a business to run and a handful of staff still had jobs. The rest had understandably drifted away or been forced to leave during those long, black months. Smith & Milton’s

which costs were to be discussed, Michael Peters would get his whole team to practise saying the figures out loud in the cab on the way there, so that they could strike just the right note of calm authority when the crucial moment arrived. Smith & Milton can't be alone in wondering if this is a knack that the design industry, if it really does exist, has somehow lost. Where once design companies exuded breezy self-confidence, there is now a sense of acquiescence. It could be the result of a natural correction following the heady days of the eighties and the subsequent crash. But perhaps the correction has gone too far and it's time for a renewed injection of confidence and self-belief. Of course, the danger is that self-assertion becomes mere bluster if you don't have the talent to back it up, but talent is the one asset that good design businesses should always be able to count on.

Maybe the answer isn't that complicated in any case. Jay Smith concludes that, while you have to be alert to the money side of things, you ultimately succeed by concentrating on the work and enjoying it. "For things to run smoothly, you can't be driven solely by profits. If you care too much about the money, you'll suffer. If you're happy to carry on enjoying it, then the money will usually work itself out." While there may be no design fairy writing the cheques, there could still be some kind of benevolent force at work. Quality usually wins out in the end.



THIS SPREAD Fortunately, the guy on the bike didn't realise the watch strapped to his wrist was worth several thousands. Michael Johnson's exercise in inverted snobbery allowed these uber-lifestyle watches to be modelled by the most unlikely of characters. THE WATCH GALLERY 1990



ABOVE **That coffee moment. Sweden's leading coffee brand celebrated its centenary with a range of nostalgic packs. Craig Barnes captured the flavour of the decade before he was born. 2005**

LEFT **We are lucky to have seen some brilliant graduates through our doors and we never stop looking. This typically Smith & Milton poster campaign was sent to every college in an attempt to lure like-minded students. 1997**

driven by big brands and, since the whole Naomi Klein *No Logo* thing, people have been put off that in a big way.”

Sarah points out how students’ aspirations have changed in other ways too. “There used to be a set path from design college through the degree shows to your first job. Then you’d get a few years’ experience under your belt before going on to a more senior role or setting up on your own. That still happens of course, but it’s just one path of many. Students might be more interested in doing charitable work in Africa, teaching art in schools, becoming exhibition curators or designing shop fronts at Selfridges. It’s a very eclectic mix.” As Sarah sees it, this is largely down to the fact that even the best students can’t count on finding a job at a good consultancy when they leave. “The competition is so great these days that students either consider other career paths entirely or go straight into business on their own. We have something called the Enterprise Centre here, where three or four people are on hand every day to advise students and encourage them to set up in business. That’s in this college alone, but multiply it out across the country and you have thousands of students setting up their own small studios every year. All of which leads to an even more fragmented industry.”

David Stuart, co-founder of The Partners, cites this as one of the biggest issues facing design at the moment. “There was a point when the education industry hooked on to design as this wonderful money-spinner, because it had this huge popular appeal and that’s where all the funding was. The problem is that, while the industry itself has contracted massively since the eighties, the colleges continue to generate an enormous volume of people. When I was scouting around for a college in the mid-sixties, I had to look hard to find anywhere at all. Now you have close to 200 institutions attracting 25,000 students a year. In a good year, London consultancies recruit about a thousand.” David goes on to question whether design education is set up to reflect the realities of the profession as it is today. “It seems to me it’s still very much based on an art model, whereby the designer is there to express their own view of the world, with the client as the patron. I used to have that attitude when I started out: the whole tortured soul, ‘I’m an artist’ thing. But the designer is there to act as the conduit between the client and the recipient, to communicate a message and solve a problem. There’s plenty of scope for individual interpretation within that, but it’s dangerous to see it as maverick self-expression.”

Sarah Temple sees this as part of an argument that has simmered in design education for many years. “It’s the whole objectivity versus subjectivity debate. On the one hand, you have the classical model that sees a good idea as being something pure, unique to the client, different