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Emotional intelligence

WE ALL KNOW THEM. They have that extra something that makes us sit up and take notice, manage to keep our (otherwise waning) attention and make us miss them when they are gone. Robbie Robertson, managing director of experiential design consultancy E2, is one such person.

Fortunately, you don't just have to take my word for it. The long list of brands that have come to E2 in the last two years of the company's short existence is testimony to its ability to not just offer, but to deliver something rather different.

E2 has completed over 178 projects in the last two years and is currently working on another 40, for brands both here and abroad, including Qantas, Commonwealth Bank, St George, Sony, Kodak, Westfield, Herman

There are people you meet in life who may amuse, entertain, even keep you on your toes, but there are few that truly delight, both intellectually and creatively. Jackie Hawkins uncovers one.

Miller, Virgin Mobile, News Ltd – and the list goes on.

It is not hard to see how clients are engaged by E2. But reeling clients in with a fancy sales pitch is the easy part: retaining them and nurturing them so that they become a part of the fabric of the place itself and wouldn't even consider going anywhere else is another question. This is where E2 excels.

There are few consultancies that would clear a desk space in the studio for clients to work alongside the team should they so wish (TrueLocal and BCU); agree to its client presenting creative back to their board without the need for E2 to even attend (Tarocash and Virgin Mobile); or could win over a client by likening them to a roast chicken dinner (Commonwealth Bank).

So, where did all this come from and exactly how is E2 managing to achieve so much, so quickly? The driving force behind the business is the collaborative partnership of Robertson and creative director Alex Ritchie, both ex-Imagination in London – the pioneering consultancy that is arguably the forerunner of experiential design – which has worked with some of the world's top brands from Diageo to Aston Martin.

But a more recent meeting of the minds at branding giant Landor compelled them to do their own thing.

"We saw a niche in the market – experiential environments – but from an extremely strategic and multi-disciplined approach," Robertson says. "A lot of companies are doing it and very well, but often as an add-on



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"In our opinion, starting from the bottom up, from the customer's viewpoint, rather than the top down, from the corporate viewpoint, yields a can't-fail strategy,"

*Alex Ritchie,
creative director, E2.*



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08.

01. Alex Ritchie.

02. - 05. E2 studio space.

06. - 08. Commonwealth Bank's Sydney Olympic Park branch.

09 - 11. The Qantas Centre of Service Excellence.

or a reaction to a larger brief. We look at environments not just from the usual floor management perspective but from a brand perspective, from a communications perspective – we look at it from a multi-faceted approach."

At the heart of the philosophy is the belief in the 'show me' aspects of a brand's delivery, believing that it is experience, rather than information, that is the prime driver of human behaviour. This means placing as much of a budget into how the consumer actually interacts with

a brand, across all five senses, and exploring how the brand can better respond to the needs and desires of the customer.

"In our opinion, starting from the bottom up, from the customer's viewpoint, rather than the top down, from the corporate viewpoint, yields a can't-fail strategy," Ritchie says.

"That is, consumer research that observes and studies consumers' interactions with products and services yields the most valuable research, not merely developing



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products and brand communications based on what the corporate R&D and marketing departments think their customers want.

"Observing how consumers interact with products or services, and then getting their feedback as to what they like and don't like, as well as what they would prefer to see – and unlocking the enjoyment assets therein – helps companies and creative consultancies design the most satisfying customer experiences."

This research and discovery phase is so important to E2 that it is not until 50 per cent of the way through its carefully crafted six-stage process that the staff even pick up a pen. This, by Robertson's own admission, "scares the living daylights out of some clients".

"But once we take them through the process they get very excited by it because they have the confidence that

the creative solution that we are going to deliver them is based on evidence, as opposed to just 'here's three ideas just choose whichever one you think is great'.

"Often creative agencies are asked to come up with three different options; well, we don't. We come up with one, because it is based on strategy. There is only one solution. There is only one creative environment that is actually going to work for them."

For any potential nay-sayers, E2 sometimes goes one step further, taking the solution to the market and testing it, giving the client confidence that it is going to work for them, before the consultants even lay a brick, or paint a wall. "We can go to the board and say, not only have we actually tested the idea with your actual customer base, we know it can be done on time, on budget, and here is the finalised package. Don't take our word

for it: take your consumer's word for it," Robertson says.

But it hasn't always been this easy. It has taken the duo years of practice to hone the process that they eventually brought into play at E2. Equally, they have worked hard to convince clients that they need to stop thinking about their brand in a two-dimensional fashion and start thinking about its overall brand recall.

Robertson highlights Singapore Airlines as a smart example of brand intelligence. "Do you know that every single airhostess at Singapore Airlines wears the same perfume?"

It is an approach that certainly seems to work for E2. For Qantas it's about investing as much of its \$10 million budget into the user end experience, so that employees can touch, see, hear and smell the brand's customer service excellence.

The result? The Qantas Centre of Service Excellence has generated an estimated \$1.5 million worth of PR, with featured publications in Australia and overseas. It has set the benchmark for airlines globally in how to excel in customer service, propelling the Qantas brand back to the top.

For the Commonwealth Bank, it's about addressing the state of anxiety that many consumers find themselves in when dealing with financial institutions, and alleviating this through considered and intelligent use of space and new 'open teller' systems.

The result? Since its inception in April 2008, the Sydney Olympic Park branch has doubled the amount of foot traffic expected in a branch of its size and demographic and has been deemed to be the 'bank of the future' by the financial service industry.

Among other projects, the group has recently completed the Australia-Indonesia Facility for Disaster Reduction in Jakarta for the Australian Government – the first time the government has allowed a logo without inclusion of its emblem.

E2 will be opening an office in Singapore in early 2010, Beijing and Abu Dhabi later in the year, and a London office by 2011. It also has a new venture – 'Place Associates' – specialising in city branding and place-making, which commenced trading earlier this year.

Perhaps one of the reasons E2 seem to be doing so well in such a short time is by knowing what it's good at – and sticking to it. If Robertson and Ritchie don't truly believe that what they present to a client is unique and different from other agencies, if they don't think they are the right fit for a job or that they won't win a project, they simply won't go for it – to the point that they've found themselves turning down offers of work.

Such straight talking has earned them an increasing reputation for excellence in their field, and it is a field in which they seem to have taken ownership. E2's work is category defining: no one else seems to be doing what this company is doing.

The media obviously thinks the same, with one marketing magazine awarding E2 the Experiential Agency of the Year in 2009. After years of working for someone else and knowing there was much more that could be done, Robertson and Ritchie have stuck their necks out, specialised, and have seen the potential for what it is. ©

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11.