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## HOW TO BRAND A HOTEL

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**ABBY MCINERNEY**

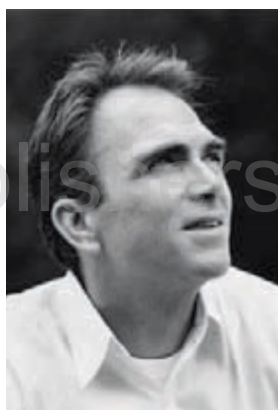
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**Scott Williams**

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**Founder and  
President/  
Scott Williams & Co.**

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### Developing cachet through innovation— and discovering the obvious

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**Your background is in theater and television—  
how did that lead into branding?**

Great branding involves great storytelling, and that's what theater is all about. At its core, branding, too, is about getting on stage and telling an amazing, indelible story. Up until recently, we didn't talk about theatricality and stagecraft in the world of brands. But in my experience, stagecraft can become a palpable form of witchcraft when it comes to branding because there's an alchemy that happens—there's a certain magic or pixie dust that people use in order to create these moments that become forever locked in your memory and tied up with your emotions.

**At Starwood, you were responsible for the visual and verbal communications for all Starwood creative projects. How did you decide what to prioritize and where to implement new strategies?**

The first issue when I started was the Starwood brand. The only thing defining the brand was the customer loyalty program, Starwood Preferred Guest. The program had a unique point of view and offered benefits such as no black-out dates, and we had to make sure the focus was on highlighting these killer brand equities because we were being outspent four to one by our competition in the hospitality arena. We constantly had to prioritize those benefits so we didn't represent ourselves as a commodity. It's so easy to become a points program where your identity seems to be about giving away free stuff. Giveaways don't necessarily generate brand loyalty. In fact, most of the time, this approach has the opposite effect. If you look at the great premium brands, one of the strongest loyalty factors—which is key to building a cult around the brand—is that people are willing to pay a little bit more because they have a love and an almost irrational attraction for the brand.

The second priority was to contend with the fact that many of our divisions had their own agencies, and as a result, there were some inconsistencies in the brand platforms. For instance, Westin had a campaign running in Japan and Korea when I arrived that hadn't run in North America for a couple of years. We walked a very fine line of making sure that the general managers could control their own businesses but when business travelers went from North America to Japan, the messaging was inconsistent, and we wanted a global look and feel. But we didn't



**TOP:**  
Promotional material  
for the Sheraton Hotel

**BELOW:**  
Website redesign for  
Morgans Hotel Group

always have the money to do that on a worldwide basis. My task was to try to create as much consistency as I possibly could.

**What did you determine were the core values of Starwood?**

Ultimately, Starwood represented innovation, leadership, and agility. When we identified these values, they were all aspirational, but it certainly was who we wanted to be. We innovated around the *W* brand as a chain. Our CEO, Barry Sternlicht, scaled up the *W* brand, and then with Westin and the “Heavenly Bed” and all the products that followed, we dramatically changed the face of hotel bedding. Ian Schrager had done the white bed before, but he never scaled it with the reach that Westin had. Schrager said that Sternlicht legitimized the boutique hotel industry as a business to investors.

**What advice do you have on how to be a good client and how to work productively with outside agencies?**

Be decisive and stick to the brief. The better the brief, the better the work. And, when you have input for the agency, be specific and make sure the feedback is valuable, and not driven by ego. There’s nothing worse than having someone say they don’t like the color blue or similar such subjective comments. The critique must always be in response to the objectives of the brief.

**After Starwood, you moved over to Morgans, which made an appeal to customers during the recession with campaigns like “Fuck the Recession.” Was that successful?**

“Fuck the Recession” was an attention-getter to say, “Hey, we feel the same way.” We wanted people to notice us in a really awful market, and we wanted to say, “The world’s not going to end, yet—it definitely sucks, but come in to our properties, and we will deliver you a very different experience.” We had two main goals with the campaign: The first was to remind the core Morgans audience that now—more than ever—they deserved to “recess” with Morgans. The second goal was to deliver a bold brand statement that Morgans is always daring, even in the face of adversity. The campaign was polarizing, which is good, because you want to know who your customers are and who they aren’t—and the whole point was to get people talking about the brand.

**You’re a big believer in “observational design research.” Can you share some interesting discoveries that you’ve found?**

Observational research is one of the best tools for bringing obvious flaws to the surface and fighting indifference at the same time. When people come to accept the status quo and stop innovating, they’ve become indifferent. If you want to fight that, you find the obvious by looking for it. You observe. Great innovation can come from observing the obvious, from paying attention to the things that are taken for granted. It’s not hard to figure out once you see it—you get it immediately. And you wonder why no one had recognized it before then. For instance, the fact that no one ever considered “remaking” the bed is remarkable. Why did every other hotel company miss this? How obvious! The “Heavenly Bed” worked for us, but that doesn’t mean we always get it right.

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Collateral for the  
“Fuck the Recession”  
campaign for Morgans  
Hotel Group

MORGANS HOTEL GROUP

Dearest Recession,

As even you are aware, it is in our nature, as well as our trade, to be accommodating. Still, and please forgive our uncharacteristically inhospitable tone, we find that we are completely unable to accommodate you. Morgans is the very model of living life with the stops off.

And considering the dastardly manner with which you rob people of their joy, not just their assets, you sir have become Public Enemy #1. This is your notice that our doors will never swing wide for you. Not ever.

Towards this end, we are putting our considerable resources and talents into thwarting you the best way we know how -- we're throwing a party, dare we say it, a bacchanal. And we warn you, style, feasting and reveling will rule the day and no doubt continue on past dawn. By the way, don't think that you can sneak under our velvet rope once the party has cleared. We intend to defy you every chance we get.

Hear that sound, Mr. Recession? That's right. It's laughter. Now, with all due respect, *gooooooodbye*

None of our love,



MHG

FUCK THE  
RECESSION.

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MORE DANCE  
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