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A Sign of the Times

by Gill Hilton

“Welcome everyone.” James Garner drew breath and tried to think positive. “I’d like to introduce Tabitha Tonkin-Bakewell. As you know, we have been fortunate enough to secure Tabitha’s time and expertise to take us forward into the next stage of our newspaper’s development: its unfolding, shall we say.”

James searched the faces on screen for a reaction to this wit, but none came.

“Hi everyone.” Tabitha Tonkin-Bakewell beamed. “Thank you James, for inviting me. I feel privileged to be working with all of you at the Frottisham and Runkworth Times.”

Jack sat back from his screen. It didn’t need a journalist to interpret her words: listen to me, I am both privileged and expensive.

Tabitha Tonkin-Bakewell, from Pivotal Innovation Strategics, explained that she wasn’t going to take up too much of everyone’s valuable time (‘Not as valuable as yours,’ thought Jack) and that they were going to start with an idea shower for a new logo, that would raise their profile in the new online focus for their newspaper. (‘For fuck’s sake,’ thought Jack)

“I want you to deep-dive into your imaginations” said Tabitha. “No cliches, just lots of thinking outside the box. How can *your* newspaper reach out to *your* client base in this exciting age of digitalism?”

‘Jesus,’ wrote Jack on the back of his fag packet. And then they were all allotted to breakout rooms, or Teams, as Tabitha called them: Team Strictly, Team Gogglebox and Team LOD. Each Team had four members: three of them were to think of a word or phrase that they associated with their newspaper and the fourth was to then draw a simple picture to capture those words. ‘Free-flow associative thinking,’ Tabitha called it.

Some minutes later they all re-grouped. Team Gogglebox went first with their feedback.

Tim from Sports held up a picture of what looked very much like an emoji of a turd. Jack hid his laughter in a fake coughing fit.

“OK Tim,” said Tabitha, earnestly. “Talk us through.”

Tim, fresh-faced, said, “Well Tabitha, my colleagues came up with the words 'appealing', 'crisp' and 'easily digested.' So it's a meringue.”

Tabitha could not decide if this was the height of banality or something she could work with. Or both.

“Interesting,” she said. “There's definitely some synergy there.”

Tim didn't know what the fuck that meant but Tabitha had nice tits so he smiled.

“Okay,” Tabitha continued. “Team LOD.”

Spencer, who wrote the 'Out and About' column, held up a drawing of a stick figure with a cap on, holding something of indeterminate shape.

“Mm,” said Tabitha.

“What does it look like?” said Spencer, clearly enjoying himself. “Go on everyone, have a guess.”

Several people had a guess.

“Okay,” said Tabitha, sensing this could get out of hand. “Please tell us, Spencer.”

“It's a milkman!” declared Spencer. “Our three words were, 'Regular, friendly, reliable.’”

Spencer was delighted with what he had delivered. Tabitha was keen to keep everyone incentivised.

“Thank you, guys,” she said. “In looking at the detail you've captured the bigger picture here.”

Jack was running out of room on his cigarette packet. It was time for his Team (Strictly) to show their 'bigger picture'. It was actually very small. Kat, who did the 'Write Up Your Street' column held up a small scrap of paper with a line-drawing of a spread-eagled bird on it. Tabitha felt encouraged, but not for long.

“It's a bird that's been run over,” said Kat. There was silence. Kat continued. “Our words were, 'Static, flat, dead.’”

Tabitha thought rapidly back to her Conflict Resolution and Progression training. Airway, Breathing, Circulation, she thought. Shit, no that was Basic Life Support. Wait, that might work.

“OK, thank you Team Strictly,” she said. “We're scheduled for a comfort break now so let's all get some fresh air. Ten minutes.”

When they came back together she would lead a breathing exercise to re-focus everyone. Then she'd circulate the ideas so far. Let each Team look at each other's logos and find a way to pivot anything negative. Put the ball in their court. Yes, that should do it.

Meanwhile, Jack drew on his cigarette and started calculating if he could afford to quit his job.