



The Grand Tour: Bringing the Paintings to the Public

London's National Gallery recently teamed up with *The Partners* in an effort to reengage its audience and increase visitation. Their solution? To bring the paintings to the public. Exact reproductions of *Old Masters* were framed and hung on walls at 44 sites around central London, in locations chosen to complement or contrast with each painting. They remained there for 12 weeks. Just as in a real gallery, information plaques were placed next to each outdoor painting, and commentary was also accessible via phone or podcast. A website built by Digit (www.thegrandtour.org.uk) provided the public with downloadable tours, maps, audio commentary and photo-sharing. *The Grand Tour* has since visited other cities. We spoke with Jim Prior, Executive Creative Strategist at *The Partners*.

Project: The Grand Tour

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 Client: National Gallery



A Conversation with Jim Prior

How would you describe your company's philosophy? And how has that philosophy helped *The Partners* stand out in the advertising community?

We are a very ideas-driven business, and we never approach things from the perspective of the obvious. We're always trying to find new, original ways to do things. We're not an advertising agency; we call ourselves a brand consultancy, but a lot of the work we do happens to be advertising. I think that comes out of the fact that alongside that very ideas-driven philosophy, we're interested in and focused on turning things into reality and creating experiences for people around brands, as opposed to just abstract notions. It's that kind of relationship between original ideas and tangible experiences that I think really sets us out.

What's the environment like at *The Partners*?

It's very collaborative. It's very intellectual in some ways, and creative in others. We put together teams of people from all sorts of different perspectives. We've got strategic thinkers and planners who come at it from perhaps the more left side of their brains. And we've got some very bright, intelligent creatives who come and bring the right side of their brains. We tend to work in big teams, collaborating from the start, contributing ideas, building on each other's thoughts, and the whole agency works that way. So everybody works in teams to build ideas together.

Describe your relationship with the National Gallery. How did their brand strategy develop?

The relationship started about four years ago. It started with a fundamental question: how do we better connect the Gallery with its key audiences? The audience they wanted to connect with the most was young, culturally aware Londoners. As a gallery, they had very high visitor numbers, many of whom were tourists visiting London. It's kind of on the list of things you must do in London. The desire was to connect more with the local audience.

And so we helped to define what their brand is. We put the experience, the public's experience of the paintings, as the driver of the brand. Then we created a set of standards that we call "tonal values," which are a kind of benchmark for how they could judge activities. Some activities were consistent with the kind of experience we wanted to create, and some things were not. That became an operational standard for them that influenced not just marketing and communications, but actually the way the front of house staff talks to visitors, the way the audio guides sound, and even the way the guides feel, for example. It even influenced the decision of who should run the restaurant in the Gallery. So it became a brief, really, of how the Gallery thought about what it did. Then the next stage was to develop a communication campaign that promoted the collection. This was actually an advertising campaign launched in 2006, in which we took an interesting idea using words to communicate the Gallery. We chose words, instead of using reproductions of paintings on posters, because of the issue that arises with such media — in so much as a painting is not a painting when it's a poster. Translations of details get lost. We used language to project a sense of the Gallery experience. From that we moved into *The Grand Tour*. So that was that. It's a journey we've been on over time.

Let's talk about *The National Gallery Grand Tour*. In an effort to reengage the public and reinvigorate visitation, you placed reproductions of the Gallery's holdings in public locations all over London. What was

your inspiration?

The inspiration really was the National Gallery itself. I mean, you walk round the Gallery, which has an amazing collection of paintings, and the experience you have when you see those paintings can be quite remarkable. The problem is that this experience is confined within the walls of the Gallery, and too many people were choosing not to visit — because perhaps they didn't have the time, they didn't have the inclination, they never tried the tour, and they weren't sure it was the right experience for them. Really what we were trying to do there was to say, well, look, we believe there's a great experience to be had when you stand in front of a painting. Rather than trying to move the people to the paintings, let's move the paintings to the people. The idea was to catch people in their everyday environment, take advantage of that moment, and get people to see something that they might not normally see. And in doing so, we hopefully catch their attention and share a bit more about what that Gallery experience can be.

How did the Gallery respond to your proposal initially?

They've been a client of ours for a number of years. We've worked with them on a program of strategic understanding around their whole brand, their proposition to the public. We've been helping them orientate themselves to build a stronger relationship with the public. So this idea came on the back of an established relationship. We had to persevere with the ideas, and it's something that took a lot of work to get to full commitment. But they responded with enthusiasm. I think they appreciated the interesting contrast between a gallery that features paintings as old as 900 years old and the presentation of that collection in a very 21st century, modern way. That was something that appealed to them from the beginning.

How did Hewlett Packard get involved?

HP had an existing arrangement with the National Gallery. Actually, there was a kind of happy coincidence, if you like, of HP looking to do something that highlighted their involvement with the Gallery — the support they provided as a sponsor, and how it took advantage of some of their technologies. So as we were thinking of this idea, we naturally came into conversation with them. And as they have the print technology, the digital scanning technology, and color calibration technology this project needed, it was a very happy and convenient marriage.

What technical aspects were taken into consideration for the paintings?

In the end, we used a kind of plastic canvas that is weather and graffiti-proof. So if anyone attempted to put paint onto the surface, it wouldn't stick. The frames we created were also weatherproof and made in such a way that they would withstand the rigor of the English summer, which is a challenge in itself. A lot of testing and a lot of work was done there. It was also very important that the print surface we chose could reproduce the color of the paintings in a very precise way. So we did a huge amount of testing to find the right techniques and so forth, and ended up with something that was incredibly robust.

Were the frames exact replicas as well?

The frames themselves were not exact replicas necessarily for each painting. But it was very important that each painting was presented in a frame that was relevant to the era from which the painting came. Because from a curatorial standpoint, having an amazing 18th century painting in a 19th century frame doesn't make sense. So we attended to that level of detail. Our campaign spanned four principal periods of paintings, so there were four types of frames. In fact, the production of the frames was a significant exercise in itself. We ended up sourcing the wood from Italy, where we could get the right size and quality. They had to be made and assembled in a way that allowed them to be fixed to the walls safely — from both a public safety standpoint, and so they couldn't easily be stolen.

How long did it take to implement the campaign?

It took nearly two years, from the point when we conceived the idea to the point that it was out and alive. You know, the interesting thing is that the idea itself didn't take very long at all. What really took time was the detail of the execution. So, for example, there were no paid-for sites and no fixed media sites; we went out and personally selected every location. This involved negotiating with each of the building owners and applying to the planning commission and authorities in each area, so that was a very long process. Then there was the whole process of selecting each painting. The level of detail we had to go to to make sure every aspect was properly delivered was pretty intense.

It's an interesting exercise. I find it very difficult to define what this was. Was it a piece of design? Was it a piece of advertising? Was it a piece of



ambient communication? I don't know, it was just an idea that was really simple to have and really hard to execute.

Any other challenges?

Well I think the planning commission channel and the building commission channel was one great challenge. That was something that took, in fact, right up until about two weeks before this went live. Prior to that point, there were still question marks from the planning commission on certain sites. Then there were the sheer logistics of producing these paintings, and finding printers who were capable of producing them — even with the technology that Hewlett Packard provided. We had to find the very best printers with the very best capability. Finally, the physical affixing of the paintings to the walls was another big challenge.

What other promotional features did you create to strengthen the campaign's statement?

There were a number of things. There was a strong digital component to it. We created a micro-site that featured fully mapped-out locations of all the paintings and highlighted all the individual walks that one could take. There were 44 paintings in total, and we broke that down into a number of smaller walks. You could also make your own individual localities that would have different themes to them.

Each of those walks was downloadable as an audio file, as an mp3 file. Then, as you got to each painting, you could listen to a description. There was also a cell phone number that you could dial for each painting, where you could listen to the same audio commentary. So, by adding audio, you could add some richness to the experience.

Additionally, each painting had a small plaque next to it that gave further details. We were really trying to take the whole Gallery experience from the inside to the outside — not just the paintings, but also some of the details, some of the stories behind it all. There were leaflets one could collect from the National Gallery with maps on them, again with more details about the paintings. And then there was a significant PR promotional to publicize the existence of the paintings.

How successful was the additional promotional?

Hugely. We had a huge uptake on the number of leaflets. There were a lot of visits to the sites. It was extremely well visited and subscribed and a very high percentage of visitors to the sites then downloaded tours and so forth.

Describe the impact your work has had on the culture of the Gallery.

I think it impacted it quite fundamentally. I think one of the issues that the Gallery had was that their culture was quite disjointed at times. So, the curators within the Gallery existed to serve the paintings. Their role very much was to protect the paintings, study the paintings, and they were dedicated to the paintings. Meanwhile, the other half of the Gallery was very much about the public and how you engage people and get more people in through the door, how you increase the accessibility of the collection. There was a sort of cultural divide between those two points of view; they weren't necessarily compatible with each other. The people standing in front of the paintings didn't necessarily serve the painting's best interest. And, in some ways, the best interests of the public weren't served by the kind of intellectual depth of stories behind the paintings. I think what we were able to achieve for the first time was to bring everybody together under a common sense of purpose and a common sense of aim, the experience of the paintings being really what the Gallery is about.

Ultimately, how successful was The Grand Tour?

It was hugely successful. I think it was successful on two levels. It was successful in so much as it persuaded people to think more positively

towards the Gallery. The research that was done afterwards showed the very high propensity of people to visit the Gallery who had not previously thought to visit it. As I said before, too, the number of downloads online was very high. All the statistics were very, very positive in that respect. The second area in which it was successful, and I think the aspect that we were most satisfied with, was it was universally well received by art critics, the public, the media and the creative community. Acceptance and approval by both the public and the creative community is something I think that generally isn't received or achieved by many other campaigns in the arts. There are things that curators like or the art critics like that the public doesn't engage in or things the creative community likes but the art world hates. So that was really great, and it generated a huge amount of press. There was press in something like 96 countries; it was lots of coverage at the time of the event. Some of it was in the arts pages, some of it was in the news pages, and some of it was in the creative press, and the beauty of it was that everyone sort of united around the sense that it was a great idea. I think in fact its greatest strength is its simplicity. It's one of these ideas that people look at and say, 'Wow, why didn't I think of that?' or 'Why didn't we do that before?' And that ultimately is its greatest proof of success.

To what would you attribute this success?

Well, to its simplicity, its boldness, and its unexpectedness. And let me add a fourth, to the attention to detail with which it was executed. Without that attention to detail it could have failed, so that was an important aspect.

Did you see any personal reactions to the Tour you'd like to share?

Yeah, there were some lovely stories. What was really nice was to see ordinary members of the public stop in their tracks. On the day we launched, we were standing in Soho in London, and as a cyclist came past, he almost fell off his bicycle as he looked at it. And there were construction workers coming down the street on their way to take the road up, stopping and staring at the painting. It was a real kind of democratic sense of experience that was created, and I think that was the loveliest thing. It wasn't something that was just targeted at and appealing to art lovers; it was exactly what we wanted it to be. It persuaded, or it got people who would never go to the Gallery, to look at art and appreciate it. Nobody looked at it and didn't like it. People looked at a painting in a context where they wouldn't expect to find it, and therefore they saw a painting in a way that they wouldn't have seen it in a gallery. It switched off their preconceptions. That's the great thing. It switches off your preconceptions and forces you to appraise it for what it is.

Can you tell us a bit about the complementary website and documentary?

We created Grandtour.org by partnering up with a digital consultancy called Digit. We conceived the idea, and they helped us build it. The documentary was actually really driven out of the Gallery, so that was floated as an idea by them to the production company that produced it, and they then went out. It was made with complete editorial freedom or independence, so it's a very independent look, which is nice, because it is very supportive and reflects the way in which the public saw the Grand Tour pretty accurately.

Any final thoughts?

I think the most significant thing to me is it's a simple idea that's been executed with a great deal of craft and detail. It's an experience. It's thinking about people's experience of the paintings and transforming the context into something original and unexpected. That's its beauty, so we're very proud, and it's lovely and sort of flattering to see how well it's been received.

“It really inspired the public, reminding them of the treasures housed by the National Gallery.” Danielle Chidlow, former Head of Communications, National Gallery



(page 10) Photograph by Matt Stuart; (page 11) Jim Prior portrait by Matt Stuart; (page 12) Left – Photo from Flickr.com, Right – Photograph by The Partners; (page 13) From left to right, The Partner creative team – Greg Quinton, Jim Prior, Kevin Lan, Robert Ball, and Donna Hemley. Photograph by Zak Waters, www.zakwaters.com.

About Jim Prior:

Jim joined The Partners in 2001 as a Strategy Consultant and became Managing Partner in 2003. He is currently leading a global positioning program for Deloitte. His other clients at The Partners have included Ford Motor Company, leading the program that resulted in the first new global standard for the Ford Blue Oval since 1961; The National Gallery (UK), an award-winning program of strategic definition and communications; and Naked, creating a brand for a start-up telecom business with a radically different attitude and go-to-market approach. Before joining The Partners, Jim worked client-side in several world-renowned consumer brands. From 1997 to 2001, he was Director of Product and Marketing (E.M.E.A. region) for Converse Inc. With responsibility spanning 33 geographic markets, he helped transform this iconic brand from a loss-making situation into profit. From 1994 to 1997, Jim was Head of Merchandise for Levi Strauss UK, where he was instrumental in driving record sales and profits through innovative, brand-led strategies and activities. Jim is a passionate advocate for the use of creativity in strategic brand thinking and is inspired by the pursuit of wholly original and thought-provoking solutions to business problems. He is a regular com-

mentator in trade and consumer media on brand-related matters, where his willingness to contribute challenging, straight-talking points of view often inspires much debate. He lives in West London with his partner and two young children. He is a keen triathlete, having completed the Nokia Royal Windsor Triathlon in 2007, and can regularly be seen running home from work in a desperate attempt to stay fit. Other interests include learning how much he doesn't know about wine and failing to complete *The Telegraph* crossword.

About The Partners:

Formed in 1983, The Partners deliver brand strategy and design for clients who require outstandingly creative solutions. The most awarded creative agency in the UK, The Partners is also recognized by peers within the group as WPP's most creative agency. With 25 years experience producing new brands, rejuvenating existing brands and consulting across all areas of visual strategy, The Partners has a wide range of expertise which spans many sectors and includes working with some of the world's most notable brands, including Deloitte, Ford, Jaguar, McKinsey & Company, Hilton and Davidoff, as well as producing creative benchmark work for the likes of the National Gallery, BBC, Wedgwood and Wolf Theiss.

For more images from *The Grand Tour*, see pages 52-53.

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