

Brand FM – from teenage angst to mid-life crisis



Is the facilities management brand an asset or a liability?
Richard Byatt looks at the way FM sells itself

At an industry conference several years ago, the audience listened appreciatively to the opening keynote speaker as he told them how important facilities management was, that they were well-positioned to contribute to their organisations' strategic missions and that basically they should be preparing for power and influence. Just one thing, he added – you've got to change the name, it's terrible!

Facilities management has suffered from something of an identity crisis since it first emerged in the mid-1980s. Is it an industry or a profession? A management or a technical discipline? Tactical or strategic? The discussion and arguments have raged.

Of course, self-awareness and critical self-examination are good things but FM has taken them to a whole new level! From conference sessions to reports by various industry and professional groupings, the perennial questions are: "Who are we?" "What do we do?" and "Does anyone like us?"

There are several reasons for this. One is that the origins of FM lie in many different disciplines and sectors, each of which has its own preconceptions, terminology, assumptions and prejudices. So the strand of FM that came out of workplace design and planning is very different from that which emerged from the building maintenance industry or the hotel and catering sector.

In a presentation at this year's ThinkFM event, consultant Rob Harris said: "FM is not a single, coherent industry. It's too fragmented and commoditised." In their influential report for the RICS, Raising the Bar: Enhancing the Strategic Role of Facilities

Management, Jim Ware and Paul Carder comment: "It could be said that the FM industry knows the cost of everything, but the business value of very little. This is a recipe for continuously lowering the bar rather than raising it."

Speaking at Workplace Futures earlier this year, consultant Dave Wilson said: "I believe that lack of clarity is one of our biggest threats as an industry."

Andy Brown of PR firm Frank & Brown has seen both sides of the business, as an editor and PR professional, as well as a stint as group head of communications for Alfred McAlpine. Brown says the 'facilities management' brand has never got enough traction with the wider business community. "It's too thin a definition," he argues, "particularly for larger, quoted groups where marketing is largely driven by City analysts who prefer established sector descriptions such as 'support services'."

David Sharp, MD of Workplace Law Group, agrees that FM has a problem with brand image: "I still hear very regularly that 'FM is a relatively young industry' and yet it's been around for more than 20 years in the UK, with plenty of institutions to support its development, both in the UK and internationally. To be fair, I don't think FM as a concept has generated much 'brand value' throughout the rest of the world either, perhaps with the exception of North America, where it seems more narrowly defined."

"I've said on many occasions recently that no industry has a God-given right to exist, and I think FM is no different. As a concept, it's still very much a container for a large

number of sub-activities, all of which can claim to be an industry in their own right."

Almost 30 years since FM emerged, these are worrying comments from experienced insiders and seasoned commentators. They suggest an industry that's not clear or confident about its identity or offer.

But is it really an identity crisis or actually a crisis of confidence? Dave Wilson again, "Another major issue afflicting the industry is, in my view, quite simply a lack of brand confidence. That applies both to the customers' view of the industry – 'facilities management' is a confused, confusing tag that doesn't carry a single sense of values, concepts, product or outcomes to our clients and customers – and within the industry across the supply chain. Put bluntly, the companies we are all familiar with don't have brands; they have logos."

But is this true? Surely the industry is awash with strap lines, mission and values statements all designed to communicate what a company does and what it stands for? How do companies in the "industry" present themselves to the world?

I recently looked at 15 major players in the facilities management market, ranging in size from Incentive FM to Carillion Support Services to see how they position themselves. Websites often have a plethora of taglines and other statements – it's not always easy to work out what they are saying.

Of the 15 just 8 use a specific "tag line" to describe themselves ie a very short description, sometimes but not always attached to the company's logo. Four use the word "facilities", two use "support

services". Some go for prosaic but reasonably informative tag lines, such as International Facilities Services or Global Workplace Solutions; others have opted for more inspirational messages such as Carillion's 'Making tomorrow a better place' or Interserve's 'Ingenuity at work.' Sodexo has the rather opaque 'Quality of Life Services'.

Looking at the longer descriptions of the 15 companies: ten include the words "facilities management", "facilities maintenance," or "facilities services". Eight claim to be the "leading" or "largest" company. Some make play of the fact that they are "independently owned". "Integrated" is another key word.

One of the obstacles to creating a clear and consistent picture of the industry is constant re-branding. For this article I reviewed the work I'd done just a few months ago. Many of the strap lines and service descriptions had changed. If a company cannot settle on a description of what it does, then it's not surprising their potential customers are confused.

The flip side of this argument is made by Andy Brown. He says definitions and descriptions do matter but mostly to the markets that providers seek to serve. They are driven much more by what market research tells them customers are looking for, than by the deliberations of standards bodies or professional associations. What might seem confusing re-branding to industry observers could be smart repositioning in response to changing customer preference.

David Sharp says it's the service providers that are growing the concept of FM and labels are not that important: "I don't know whether successful service providers really care whether they are called 'FM' companies or not ...they are focused on providing solutions, and increasingly in more innovative and wide-reaching ways. They are much more involved in taking direct responsibility for outcomes for their clients than influencing the factors that produce these outcomes."

There's clearly a role for professional and industry bodies to demystify the FM market. Unfortunately, the number of groups claiming to represent or promote FM in some way has created confusion rather than clarity. These include the BIFM, FMA, RICS, CIBSE, CIOB and the BSA. The recent announcement of merger plans by the BIFM, FMA, CSSA and Asset Skills could bring much needed focus and critical mass, although the initial statements seem to have been tempered by caution following reaction from stakeholders.

Whatever happens, a new industry alliance will need to agree core values and messages and then promote them vigorously, consistently and with confidence. It will also need to back up its claims with data. Industry bodies have been poor, with the notable exception of lobbying group the BSA, at investing in the research to support their positions.

As well as facts, industry representatives

need to have robust opinions and the confidence that they do indeed speak for the sector. David Sharp sees a mixed picture: "Are the various groups doing the right things? That's a much tougher question to answer. I really do welcome consolidation at the professional / trade body level, which – if done well – should allow a more coherent and efficient approach to developing the sector."

"Good work has been done by many of these groups to attract new people into the industry – media coverage, apprenticeships and the drive to get FM in schools – but I still don't get the impression young people see FM as a 'profession' they really want to get into."

For individuals, the underlying issues seem to be profile, recognition and professional confidence. Apart from a period in the '90s when ambitious facilities managers were being persuaded to turn their operations into profit centres, the received wisdom was that FM worked quietly in the background, only attracting attention when it failed.

Many FMs still prefer a low profile but this won't necessarily provide the role models to develop the profession and they cannot assume their work will be recognised. As seasoned FM professional Barry Varcoe has pointed out, FM cannot afford to remain

the 'silent service': "If we carry on down the commodity route our influence will diminish."

Without being overly assertive or claiming influence they don't have, FMs need to do a certain amount of internal marketing and networking to maintain their profile.

What can be done at an industry level? David Sharp suggests two, related, areas where the FM brand could be strengthened – value and sustainability. "I think there is increasing recognition that FM can and should play a crucial part in value creation," he says. "FM can play a hugely influential role in delivering the classic 'triple bottom line': people, profit, planet. It's no good working in a productive environment if what you are working on is not socially acceptable, or if it's not sustainable. It's also no good having a wonderful and productive workplace if the human resources strategy is not aligned with it. This is where I think 'FM' (or whatever one might call it) could make a telling contribution, in bringing all elements of the triple bottom line together in one overriding concept."

It's interesting to look at other sectors and other markets. If UPS, with its 'We Love Logistics' campaign, can make logistics exciting, then surely we can do the same for facilities management.

Last time I wrote about an industry-wide initiative, the obvious stumbling block was the plethora of voices. This obstacle may be removed and then maybe we could see something like the German 'Moglichmacher' campaign (loosely translated as "making possible" or "the enablers" – see www.fm-die-moeglichmacher.de) that brought together a number of providers to fund a national advertising campaign highlighting the contribution of FM to business and everyday life.

In a sector as diverse as FM, the industry 'brand' is the aggregate of all the behaviours and messages of the various players. For Dave Wilson, part of the answer is greater focus: "Service providers need to better understand where they really add value and focus on that as a USP, portray it consistently and build genuine capability to deliver on that brand promise."

David Sharp believes there is a huge opportunity in broadening FM into a wider discipline that takes sustainability under its wing and moves itself up the value chain as the experts in 'value-added contribution' to the client organisation's corporate goals. "I do think there is too much navel gazing," he argues "and not enough focus on confidently adding value, creating seamless solutions across people, place and planet to deliver profit. If you do that, you don't need to argue the right to your existence, you become the most popular person at the party."

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