



Andrew Sims
HR recruitment
manager
British Gas



Ross Hutchins
Creative director
Ethos Creative

A virtual gas of a village

Engaging new starters on a journey through their new company before beginning work was the challenge **British Gas** gave to **Ethos Creative**

The Challenge

Having moved its UK customer service adviser jobs online back in February 2008, British Gas had planned the second stage of improving its recruitment by introducing an onboarding phase. The aim was to improve the firm's new starter attrition rate, as British Gas was losing a fair proportion of new starters within the first year. There was also a small drop-out rate from the time candidates were offered a job and their actual start date. Andrew Sims, HR recruitment manager at British Gas, realised there was a disassociation felt by candidates before starting their new role, as well as a lack of awareness regarding company benefits among current British Gas employees.

Cardiff-based Sims led the project along the lines of a British Gas Village and approached a number of large creative agencies, mostly in London, with a loose brief along those lines. He wasn't impressed with the response. "I decided to approach other studios closer to home," he told *Recruiter*. "I had already had dealings with local multimedia design agency Ethos Creative and they were close to Cardiff."

Ross Hutchins, Ethos's creative director, told *Recruiter*: "The site had to involve all age groups and ethnic backgrounds. The target audience was everybody — a really difficult challenge! However, the fairly loose brief gave us a lot of scope. We worked along the virtual village scenario and suggested ideas that British Gas didn't think were possible for both the price and the implementation." Sims was blown away by their pitch. "Rather than give us suggestions on paper, Ethos came with an interactive, fully animated working website, albeit in rough form," he said. "The job was theirs!"

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ROSS HUTCHINS

job titles and locations, which would link each person with their individual job." Currently this involves three job titles and six locations, but British Gas is planning to roll out a village which will have an additional 20 jobs in 12 locations for its service departments.

Both companies had to work extremely closely. "We created a working party from different departments and locations nationwide," said Sims. "They suggested things that could be fed into the site and cater for the different centres. For example, one of the locations wanted details of its car share scheme to be put up on the site." Hutchins added: "There were regular meetings and consultations throughout so we knew exactly what British Gas wanted." And one of the needs was an easy-to-manage site, with a content management system that made it easy for non-technical people to go into and edit content as and when necessary. "The design and build, rather than create more work for managers, aimed to complement training and management," explained Hutchins. "The aim was to take the workload off managers as the system would do everything automatically; for example, send out start date material, remind the new starter to visit the site through email, advise them on what to wear or bring with them on the first day."

Sims says it is too early yet for any meaningful metrics relating to attrition, as they only went live with the site last November. However, the feedback from new starters has been extremely positive. "They like the fact that they know about pensions, career progression, the values and ethics of the company, and even what their office will look like," said Sims. "Trainers can then start on the real training rather than introducing new joiners to company policy, pensions and sickness benefits."

At the end of April, with the help of Ethos Creative British Gas aims to go live with an onboarding site for service engineers. "The technicians can see what the new meters look like and what tools they'll be using," said Sims. And there is also a senior leadership team site in the pipeline for director and corporate level entrants, all based around the Virtual Village. "I can't speak highly enough of Ethos Creative," Sims enthused. "They've worked wonders and taken our ideas to the next level."

The Solution

With the amount of animation and 3D graphics, there would obviously be technical issues involved in the build. Hutchins explained this was just part of the problem: "As well as creating avatars [an online graphic persona] encompassing a range of ethnicities, web designers had to deal with multiple variations of the site such as

key lessons

- **Keep in constant contact with your client and manage their expectations. Better to exceed a customer's expectations rather than disappoint them**
- **Don't include too many ideas and over complicate the site. Include what the end-user needs and wants to see. Don't overload them with too much information as you'll only put them off**
- **Before embarking on such a project, it's vital to engage with as many people in the business as possible, right to director level. Once the site has been designed it's too late to add to from those areas which didn't give any input**
- **Would you like to be involved in The Challenge? Contact Vanessa Townsend at vanessa.townsend@centaur.co.uk**