FULLY SATURATED

UK Design Agency Positioning Audit 2025 SUMMARY

by Emily Penny and Joel Stein

Becolourful

Give me an average proposition message for a branding agency.

GPT-4o Poe

We transform businesses with rigorous thinking and crafted creativity. We build standout brands that create fans, fuel growth, and leave a lasting, positive impact in a changing world.

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INTRO

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Authors

Emily Penny

Emily is a brand strategist and copywriter with an MA in marketing. She's been in branding for 25 years including working at London design agencies in strategy, client services and business development. She has lectured in branding at London Metropolitan University and sat on award juries for D&AD and Design Week. Emily founded Becolourful in 2013 and heads up a team of associates from her office in West Sussex. They work with people-based businesses to align teams around their narrative. She launched her BrandStrand® positioning framework in 2024.

"Everyone knows that the hardest job in the studio is branding the studio. It's difficult to find that same clarity you rely on when working on client brands, but right now it's critical. The creative sector is under all sorts of pressures and agencies need to get clear on their proposition. There's a tendency not to think of agencies as 'brands,' and to skip on doing the homework. We want to inspire studios of all sizes to look beyond the same promises we see time and time again."

Joel Stein

Joel is a writer and creative consultant with an MA in Media & Journalism. Before going independent in 2023, Joel led the content practice at design and innovation agency Code Computerlove (now EM Code). In 2022, he authored Idea Tactics (published by Pip Decks) — a creative thinking card deck used by teams at organisations like Nike, LEGO, and the UK Cabinet Office. Joel writes about brands and creativity for MediaCat Magazine, and publishes a newsletter — Weirdness Wins — exploring the fuzzy edges of culture, communication, and consciousness.

"There are ancient equivalents of the cobbler's shoes proverb across the world. There seems to be something about applying your expertise to your own endeavours that humans have always struggled with. Clearly, agencies aren't immune to this phenomenon. Branding specialists that preach bold creativity routinely repeat the same ideas as their peers. But as the most interesting agencies show, it doesn't have to be this way."

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Purpose of the report

In every sector, businesses connect with their audiences through positioning – being known for something, not everything. Investing in a clear promise means that people are more likely to feel something, think something, and remember your business. It means you can rise above the commodity services in the sector and defend higher fees. As brand designers, you already know all of this, it's what you do for clients. We're here to remind you. We're here to ask: are you treating your own business like a brand? And if not why not? In this highly competitive and saturated market, it's time to walk the talk.

Fully Saturated is an independent report by brand voice consultants Emily Penny and Joel Stein. Its purpose is to present a map of the UK design sector, to showcase the most interesting branding agency propositions, and to inspire a sector we love to 'think brand.' It provides valuable insight for agency leaders, would-be agency leaders, and those supporting them on their brand positioning.

Our audit covers UK design agency messaging as seen on their websites. We've ignored portfolios and looked exclusively at what agencies say about themselves in words. Decks, social media content, and visual branding are not covered – not because these things aren't important, but because our focus here is verbal identity.

25 agencies have been selected to showcase a wide range of positioning strategies, driven by various features: operational model, ethos, vertical sector, use of technology, or process. Our point is that are many options when choosing what you want to become famous for and we want agencies to be more confident in finding the narrative that's right for them.

NOTICE:
No designers were hurt in the making of this report.
Some of our best friends are designers.

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The Agencies

Full report includes 25 case studies from this list.

1HQ
3800
Accept & Proceed
Airborne studio
Alan
Among Equals
Analogue
& Above
AndSmith
Art & Capital
Art Is My Career
AUFI
B&B
Baxter & Bailey
Big Fish
Boudica
Boring
Brandon
Buttercrumble
Brand Opus
Bulletproof
Conran Design Group
Continuous
Creative Spark
Crush
Curious
D8
Dawn
Denomination
Dept
Designbridge
Design Studio
DixonBaxi
DNCO
Dollop
Driftime
Dragon Rouge
Dutch Scot
Eat Big Fish
Earthling
Echo
Edit
Else
Elmwood
Fire Dept
Free
Fold7Design
Found Studio
Foundry
Fun
Futurebrand
Good Agency
Good Habit
Hatchly
Here
Horrible brands
How & How
Human After All
I-AM
I Am Female
Ideas + Outcomes
Imagist
Interbrand
IYA studio
Jack Renwick Studio
Jamhot
Jones Knowles Ritchie
Johnson Banks
Justified Studio
Kiss
Kota
Koto
Landor
Land of Plenty
Lantern
Lime Green Tangerine
Love
Love & Logic
Lucky Dip
Made Thought
Magpie Studio
Make Us Care
Midday
Mother Design
Moving Brands
Mr B & Friends
Mr M Idea Studio
Mr President
Muddy Wellies
Mytton Williams
Nomad
Notable
Notepad
Nucleus
OK Cool
Only
OPX
Orca
Otherway
Outrageous
Pearlfisher
Pencil
Pentagram
Platform13
Point
Praline
Ragged Edge
Red Dot Studio
Robot Food
Saboteur Studio
Sail
Saffron
Shaped By
Small World
Someone
Spin
Stormbrands
Stranger & Stranger
Studio Floc
Studio Kiln
Studio Juice
Studio Output
Taxi Studio
TeamEleven
Templo
The Behaviours Agency
The Chase
The Clearing
The Click
Thisaway
Three Ten Seven
Together
Touch
True North
Turner Duckworth
Two Times Elliot
Up there everywhere
United Us
Venture Three
Wiedemann Lampe
Wildish & Co
Without
White Bear
Wolff Olins
Wonderhood
Wonderland
Workroom
Wrapped
Yard Creative
Yoke

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METHOD

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Method

Fully Saturated looks at UK brand design agencies, an agency being more than one person. Our method was desk research further informed by a qualitative survey with 36 respondents, and a review of relevant expert white papers, newsletters and opinion content from LinkedIn.

Over 300 agency websites were sourced from directories, design press, awards, and personal recommendations – agencies of all sizes, from all parts of the UK. No agencies paid to be included and none are our clients. We know we will have left many wonderful agencies out because they didn't get on our radar, but we believe we have reviewed enough to draw out some helpful lessons applicable to all.

We examined 150 of the agencies more closely to analyse messaging for patterns and trends. Our focus is strategic messaging and brand positioning. For our Top25 showcase, we sought to celebrate the most thought-provoking and diverse examples. We used a simple heuristic to evaluate three characteristics: **Angle**, **Memorability**, and **Relevance** (ARM). Additionally, the agencies were mapped using Becolourful's BrandStrand® framework.

ANGLE

A point of view that goes beyond a basic explanation of design

RELEVANCE

A message that addresses client needs and makes a compelling case

MEMORABILITY

A simple singular idea that stands out and makes an impression fast

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FINDINGS

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The summary

Where we are

Design is a sector undergoing change and facing significant challenges, from post-Covid home-working to cost-pressures and AI. Every agency is looking at how to structure the business and proposition going forward. The UK is a global leader in design and creativity, but is our legacy becoming a barrier to change? Now is not the time to be complacent. Yet, when we began reviewing branding agency websites in earnest, we found that the most exciting and compelling propositions were from those based overseas. In particular, the well-known London agencies have familiar promises and language. The emphasis is on transformation and change, the ideas are abstract, vague and impersonal. Where is the *bravery* that branding agencies call for? Where are the big ideas and the memorable slogans? Why are branding agencies reluctant to see their own businesses as brands? What's more, most people in the sector know it's an issue; they told us so. We're not revealing anything new here. But we are calling for action. We want to help agencies of all sizes to use brand thinking to decide on their positioning, and amplify it with *ownable* words.

Starting the conversation

In this audit, we went looking for agencies that had a point of view on their discipline or their market; an angle. The ones that were going beyond the generic principles of how design works, the ones going all-in with a big idea of their own. We soon realised, this is a complicated and nuanced sector. It's not as simple as completing a fill-in-the-blanks positioning statement. We needed to go deeper. We've listened to people in the industry and want to air some of the reasons *why* creative agencies might be allergic to taking their own medicine. Because if we are all more aware of the challenges and obstacles, it takes us one step closer to addressing them. Yes, this is therapy for a whole sector. And a provocation to show up more authentically, and more creatively.

Understanding a peculiar sector

We believe the challenge starts with the **portfolio mentality** that designers grow up with through their design education and job interviews. The idea that the work speaks for itself. This persists within agencies of all sizes and stages of maturity. And while it's true that clients are often most interested in seeing past work, particularly in their sector, there's extra work to be done in presenting this important evidence as part of the brand narrative. Client work is crucial, but the most interesting agencies have something to say. The next challenge we identified is a **service mindset**. Agencies are so busy servicing client needs that it's genuinely hard to carve out the time to work on their own business – yet they expect this of clients.

Another significant influence is the challenge of **attracting talent**. A studio is only as good as its designers, and agency leaders (many of whom are designers themselves) are fast to prioritise this audience and promote the messages they want to hear: promises of creativity, bravery, bold thinking, disruption. Designers want to work on brands doing new and interesting things, they want to be seen to be part of that. There is plenty of **ego** in this sector, and sensitivity around what creative peers might think. It's a close-knit community with a strong sector-wide culture. In fact, the **lack of diversity** in agencies (particularly social and ethnic background but also sex and sexuality) has to be one of the factors contributing to the sameness of agency outlook and positioning. Diversity of people will naturally lead to wider perspectives and more varied brands. As such, in our Top25 we feature studios based in a wide range of locations, from Newcastle to Leeds to Brighton. Over a third are female-led agencies. Only a few are led by people of colour – they were hard to find.

But overall, the big issue seems to be the **fear** of putting prospects off. This is where it gets real. To be a brand you can't be all things for all people, it requires sacrifice, being the right solution for a defined need or sector – not all. The symptom might be homogeneity but the underlying cause is the **fragility of the market**: short-term projects and a highly competitive commissioning processes, with free pitching still rife.

These insights and more are unpacked further in the full report.

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The audit

We sought out the most interesting design agency propositions and the most memorable language. To help us evaluate what we found, we used a simple heuristic: Angle, Relevance, and Memorability. Here's what we observed. A vertical sector specialism is a classic strategy that still works well. We see this with **Stranger & Stranger** (drinks), **Boring** (b2b), and **Edit** (culture). But niching is not the only route; there are so many more options. Using Becolourful's BrandStrand® framework, we were able to identify examples of 18 universal brand positioning ideas, proving that there are many kinds of promises beyond the obvious themes of creativity or niche specialism.

Who's really standing out?

We found agencies like **Art is My Career**, a studio in North Yorkshire that doesn't just talk about positive impact (as so many do) but itself is a community interest company investing profits in educational resources. We found **I Am Female**, a London-based studio that's proudly queer-led with a provocative alternative attitude to match. **Small World** is making a virtue of its decentralised operational model, tailoring teams around projects. We looked at Manchester-based **The Behaviours Agency** bringing behavioural science to brand creation. **Bulletproof**'s recent rebrand sees it squarely standing for 'desire.' Brighton-based **Crush** presents the simple idea of 'craft' at its heart and while craft shows up in much design agency branding, none own the concept with such confidence. It's unmissable. As a brand idea should be.

The way forward

We conclude with a call to arms. A call for agencies to invest in their own **Angle**, in **Relevance** to their audience, and in **Memorability** of language. This is a saturated and competitive sector. So let's not forget what we preach to clients: *building a brand is how you make selling easier*. We want agencies to step away from commoditisation, to lean into their genuine point of difference, and to develop more substantial thought leadership around it. In the UK, we have a world-leading creative sector – let's keep it that way as we navigate the inevitable challenges of the next few years.

The obstacles

1. Portfolio mentality
2. Bias towards servicing clients
3. Focus on peer audience
4. A homogenous culture
5. Market fragility

The common ideas

1. Empowerment – eg promise of growth, change, transformation
2. Credibility – eg size, heritage, proven quality
3. Niche sector expertise – eg drinks, arts, b2b, charities
4. Ethics – eg positive impact, purposeful brands
5. Newness – eg innovation, disruption

The practical take-outs

1. Be authentic
2. Think value
3. Keep it simple
4. Own the words
5. Go all in

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Creatives on agency messaging

“Agencies are working hand-to-mouth on a financial knife-edge, and fee-paying work is always, always the priority.”

Tony Blow, Stand

“The objectivity we bring to clients is hard to apply to ourselves—every idea feels personal, every decision weighed down by internal bias.”

Bryan Kidd, Maven

“It’s hard to do. It takes time. It means sacrificing something.”

Andy West, Multiadaptor

“I think it starts with creative education. We think in terms of portfolios.”

Lydia Thornley

“It’s as though every design agency is using the same generic copywriter!”

Lucy Rees, The Comms Studio

“The ones I think don’t work are the ones that try too hard. That’s the agency owners’ curse. They care too much.”

Tash Peskin, Boring

“We don’t spend enough time looking at just how homogenous the agency landscape is. I genuinely think some founders think their agency is the only one that helps ambitious future-facing brands to thrive in a modern world.”

Dave Corlett, Shaped By

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Creatives on agency messaging

“The challenge is crafting messaging that highlights the agency’s strengths without confining it to a specific niche. Many designers value the flexibility to work across diverse sectors.”

Stephen Kennedy, Studio Fury

“Why would any client trust an agency to position and differentiate their brand, if the agency can’t position and differentiate their own?”

Tony Blow, Stand

“It’s that theory of “Well, if it works for them. It should work for me” and everyone starts to look and feel the same.”

Daniel Poll, Noramble

“Clients don’t understand the bollocks we talk.”

Rebecca Magnus, Magnus & Co

“Fear stops agency leaders from allowing real opinions leave the four walls of the business.”

Sarah O’Connell, Mr B & Friends

“There are so many pertaining to do everything, it’s incredibly difficult for clients to navigate.”

Nat Maher, Kerning the Gap

“They rely on the quality of the work to tell their story.”

Jonathan Wilcock, So What If

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15 most over-used phrases

Phrase	Google results
"stand out in a crowded market"	7,020,000
“an extension of your team”	3,840,000
"stand out and stand for something"	323,000
"we bring brands to life"	208,000
"make your brand impossible to ignore"	150,000
"designing the future of your brand"	139,000
"we design with people in mind"	103,000
"accelerate your brand's growth"	52,900
"a collective of like-minded individuals"	41,300
"we're not just a design agency"	37,000
"we're not like other agencies"	23,200
"we're not your average agency"	19,400
"team of thinkers, doers"	16,600
"we work with ambitious brands"	14,000

This table shows how many pages appear in Google’s search index for these exact phrases. It’s an indication of how common these phrases are on the internet overall. Phrases with thousands or millions of existing instances online are best avoided by agencies aiming for distinctive, memorable messaging.

You can check the originality of any piece of copy by searching it in quotation marks on Google, then clicking “Search tools” to reveal the number of indexed results. If you’re writing new copy, zero is the ideal number, especially for headlines, taglines etc. Zero results means you’ve found a truly original way to articulate something.

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TOP25

Celebrating the best in
design agency positioning.

Agency Name	Tagline
[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]
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Top line take-outs

Practical actions to think about straight away.

1. BE AUTHENTIC
2. THINK VALUE
3. KEEP IT SIMPLE
4. OWN THE WORDS
5. GO ALL IN

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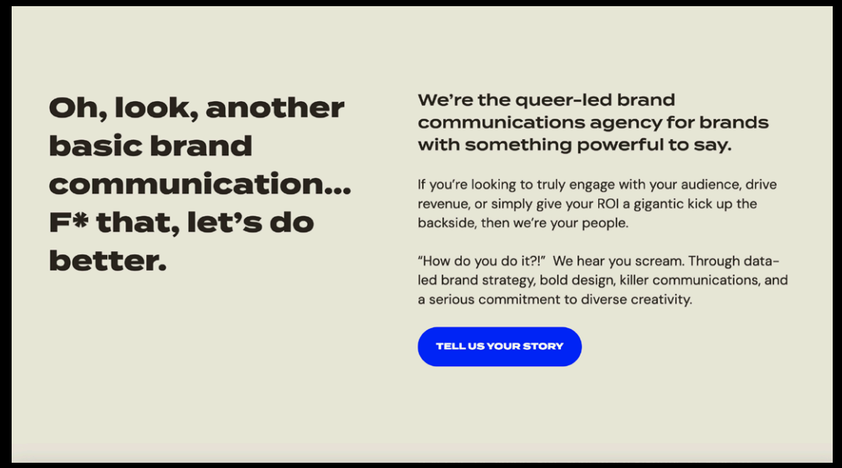
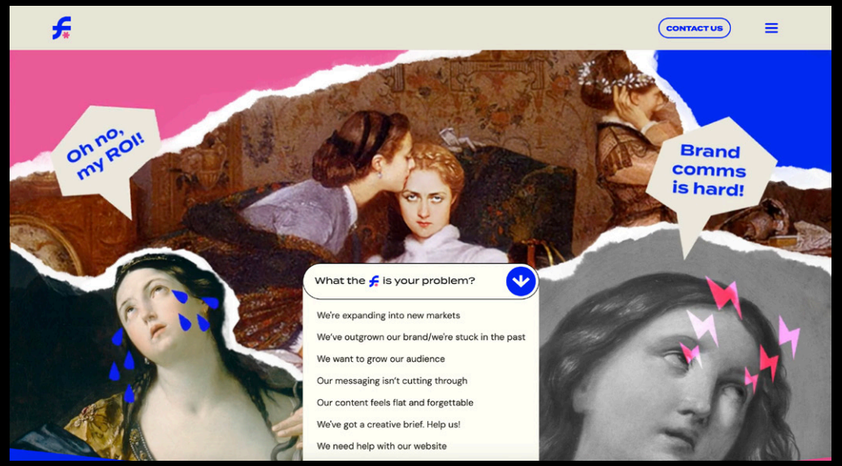
1. BE AUTHENTIC

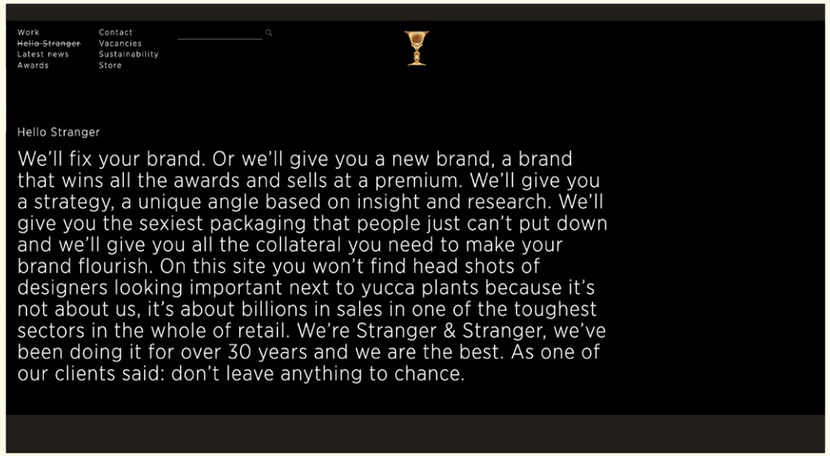
You're brilliant. You already have a superpower. You don't need to invent it, you need to unearth it and amplify it. To be more you than you've ever been before.





2. THINK VALUE

Stop talking to the sector; think about what your superpower means for clients. What’s the problem you solve in a way no other agency can?



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3. KEEP IT SIMPLE

Your central brand idea should be easy to grasp, and obviously valuable. Keep the idea simple – then you can play with the execution.

crush.

We *craft* the future for the world's most ambitious brands.

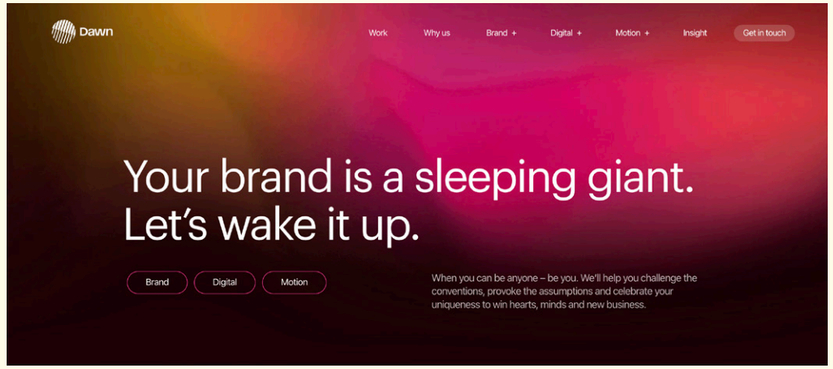
Feel *the craft*

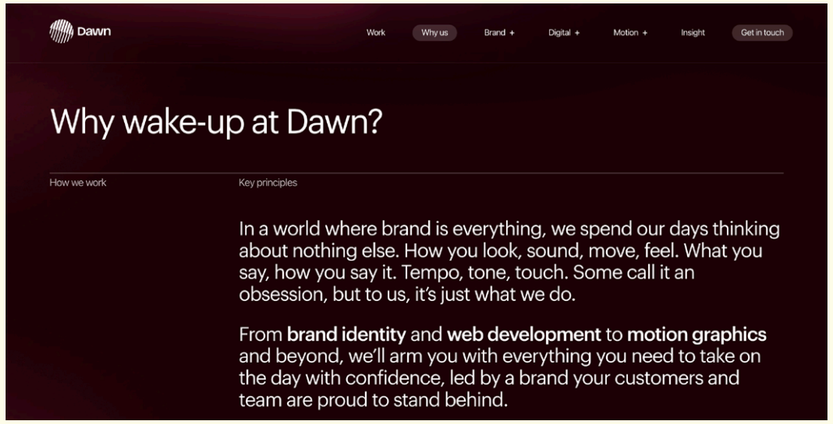
Trust *the craft*

Disrupt *the craft*

4. OWN THE WORDS

Even if your promise isn’t 100% unique, your language can be. Make the message unmissable, make the words memorable. Be creative.





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5. GO ALL IN

Commit to what you stand for. This isn’t just a tagline. This isn’t just web copy. It’s how you live and breathe, every day.

IN DEPTH ANALYSIS

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We review your current website and then schedule a 1:1 90 minute discussion with you to go through recommendations, challenges and ideas.

Basic Positioning and Manifesto

Familiarisation, 2 hour workshop, core narrative (proposition, manifesto, about).

Main Messaging Package

Discovery interviews, 2 hour workshop, message toolkit and website copy.

Full Authority Package

As above plus hero thought leadership piece and brand voice guide.

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THANK YOU

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