

Report
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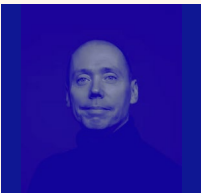
Same. Difference.

Dissecting the (un)competitive positioning
and language of leading UK construction
and engineering consultancies



Garrett Reil
The clarity to move forward

About Garrett Reil



Garrett is an independent brand strategist and writer with 30 years' experience working with some of the world's most recognised brands. He has held senior roles at FutureBrand, Landor, and Brand Union. His diverse experience spans sectors and clients including Bosch, Heineken, Hilti, Microsoft, NatWest, Virgin Media and Zurich.

He specialises in defining positioning and putting it to work – in messaging, in voice, in the language that connects a brand to its audiences. Recent work for Aton Lifesciences, Engie, Mitsubishi and Virgin Media has been recognised at Transform Europe Awards.

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Context

Same. Difference.

Dissecting the (un)competitive positioning and language of leading UK construction and engineering consultancies

This report examines the market positioning statements, brand values and language of 75 construction and engineering consultancies operating in the UK*. It asks a simple question: when these firms describe themselves, are they saying anything that distinguishes them from the firm next door?

The answer, overwhelmingly, is no.

More than four in five of the firms in this study use language that could be swapped with a competitor's and nobody would notice.

*We audited the positioning, purpose, values and brand voice of the top 75 firms from the Building Top 150 Consultants 2025 ranking (UK fee income), rating their overall differentiator strength as Common, Moderate or Distinct, and scoring their writing each across seven voice dimensions using our *Brand Voice Radar*. The methodology is set out at the end of this report.



Introduction

More than four in five of the firms in this study have messaging that is non-competitive and brand language that could be swapped with a competitor's and nobody would notice.

That finding requires care in its interpretation.

These are not firms that have neglected their brands. Several have invested significantly – commissioning internationally recognised branding agencies, producing visual identities of real quality. Yet the sector has still converged on a narrow band of shared positioning territory and near-identical language. Understanding why, and what the exceptions are doing differently, is what this report is for.

A brand is not a logo or series of visuals. It's a reputation – the sum total of what your audience thinks of you. Your behaviour is the driver of reputation, and language the engine of behaviour.

Competitive positioning

Market positioning is a distillation of that reputation. An answer to the question every prospective client asks (consciously or not) choosing between technically comparable firms: why you, rather than the next firm? It's what tells the people (who don't yet know you) why they should choose you. And to those who do, it confirms that their confidence is well placed. In other words a mechanism which helps a firm's reputation to travel beyond the relationships that built it.

Words worth

The words a firm uses to describe (and sell) itself are not decoration. They are operational – shaping how people inside the firm act and how people outside the firm feel and understand your unique offer. Get it right, and they go to work for you every day. Say the same things as everyone else, your messaging does no meaningful work for you.

Why should a construction or engineering consultancy care about this?

Your brand is your ambassador. It is in the room before you are and it stays after you leave. It's what helps get you on the longlist, what tips the decision when the technical scores are close, what makes a client pick up the phone to you rather than the firm next door. It is a distillation of what it is to work with you – and for firms that win work through relationships and reputation, it is the mechanism by which that reputation travels beyond the people who already know you.

Why measure it?

Brand is notoriously difficult to quantify, and the sector is understandably sceptical of anything that cannot be put on a spreadsheet. But difficulty is not an excuse for avoidance. If what gets measured gets improved, leaving your competitive positioning and messaging unexamined is leaving potential competitive advantage on the table. The point of this audit is not to reduce brand to a number. It's to help make the invisible visible – reveal patterns that are obvious once you see them but that no individual firm can see from the inside.

These were, until recently, unglamorous businesses.

These were principal-led practices where the founder's name above the door was the brand, reputation travelled by word of mouth, and the sales pitch was a rational one: technical capability, track record, geographic reach. That era is over.

Often, firms that once operated as regional partnerships now compete internationally, recruit across borders, and pitch against each other for work they would never previously have encountered. We are seeing global brands in construction and engineering.

Rational + Emotional wins the argument

To connect with people – clients, talent, communities – a brand needs to engage them emotionally, not just rationally. That's not something these businesses have traditionally done, or are comfortable with. The shift toward purpose-led positioning is partly an attempt to make that emotional connection, and the instinct is right. People do not choose between technically comparable firms on a spreadsheet. They choose the one that feels right. The trouble is that the sector has reached for the same emotional territory at the same time, and when everyone's 'engineering a better world', the emotional positioning becomes as crowded as the rational positioning it was meant to replace.

Purpose, plus

Many firms in this study have started with 'why' – articulating a purpose, a reason for being beyond profit. A good place to start. But the popular formulation – 'people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it' – is incomplete.

People are also buying how you do it: how it feels to work with you, the worry you take away, the confidence you give them that the thing will be done well. You started with why. That's okay. Now keep going. The firms in this study that achieve genuine distinctiveness tend to be the ones know exactly what they offer, or ones that have gone further – articulating not just a purpose but a way of working, a personality that is specific to them.

Being distinctive visually without a distinctive message or voice is half a brand identity. A purpose without a positioning is half the proposition. Listing values without connecting them to behaviours is work half done. Across the sector, the investment in 'brand-ing' has outpaced the investment in building a truly differentiated brand.

The foundations

This audit began purely as a study of language – how construction and engineering consultancies write about themselves, and the degree to which that language has converged. But language is a visible structure above the surface.

Looking beneath the shared vocabulary, we found shared positioning, shared values architecture, and shared strategic territory.

The convergence runs deeper than words, it revealed lost opportunities for firms to differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace.

2. Positioning and purpose

The single most crowded positioning territory in the dataset is some variation of '[verb]-ing a better [world/future/tomorrow]'. Nine firms use this formula. Aecom delivers a better world. Arup shapes a better world. Cundall is engineering a better world. AtkinsRéalis is engineering a better future. The phrasing varies; the territory is identical.

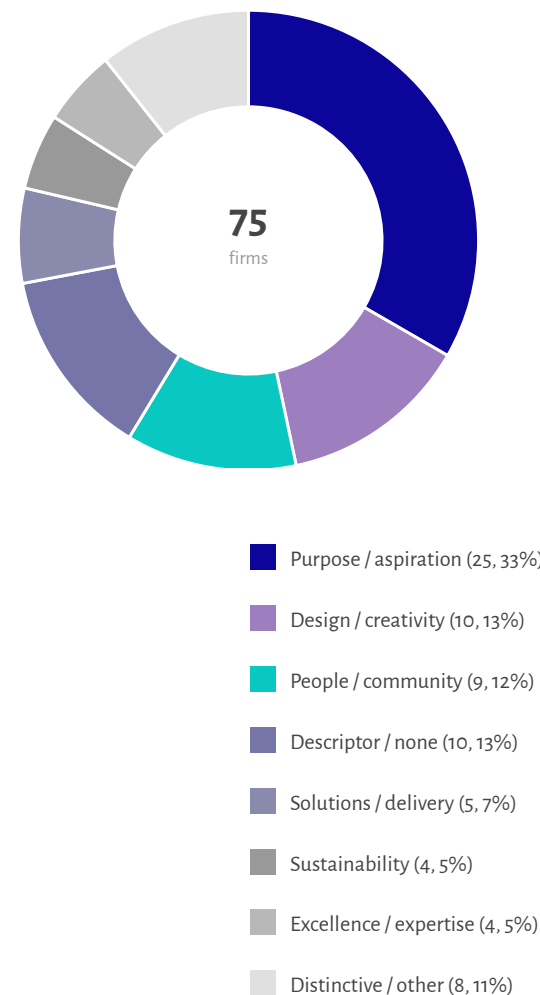
Beyond this cluster, three other formulas account for most of the dataset. Seven firms lead with global scale – headcount and geographic reach as proof of capability. Six position themselves around a sustainable future, three with straplines so similar they are functionally identical: 'Engineering for a sustainable future', 'Engineering a sustainable future' and 'Engineering Sustainable Futures.' Five describe themselves using a plan-design-deliver sequence – a full-service framing that stops differentiating when multiple competitors use the same structure.

This convergence is not carelessness. Purpose-led positioning is a legitimate strategic direction. The pressure to articulate a firm's contribution to sustainability and social value is real – from clients, talent markets, investors and regulators. The sector's challenges are genuinely shared: climate, urbanisation, infrastructure deficit, resource scarcity. Of course firms working on those challenges reach for similar language.

The problem is not the territory. It's what happens when the whole sector occupies it at the same time.

A positioning that is true of everyone distinguishes no one.

Figure 1:
Positioning line / strapline formula distribution across 75 firms.



The language of sameness

For a growing number of firms in this dataset, the purpose statement has quietly taken over the role of the positioning. The two are not the same thing. A purpose explains why you exist. A positioning explains why someone should choose you over the competitor. When one substitutes for the other, you get language that is sincere and aspirational – but not differentiating.

'Improving quality of life' (Arcadis), 'delivering a better world' (Aecom), 'positively impacting people's lives' (Baily Garner) – these are purposes, used as market positionings. They describe the outcome the firm hopes to contribute to, not the distinctive capability or perspective it brings to its clients. Arguably, any firm in this dataset could adopt them without changing a word of its actual offer.

That is not a positioning. It is a shared ambition. To be a positioning, it would need to be unique in the market, or at least highly differentiated from others.

Sustainability – imperative or differentiator?

Sustainability is the leading imperative of our age.

No serious construction or engineering firm can ignore it – nor should they. The built environment accounts for roughly 40% of global carbon emissions; the sector's responsibility is not in question.

But there is a difference between a commitment and a positioning. Twenty-two of 75 firms claim sustainability as a core value territory. Six position it as their primary strapline. When nearly a third of a competitive set claims the same ground, it has become table stakes – it's now something you must have, but something that no longer distinguishes you.

The firms that handle it best treat sustainability as embedded rather than proclaimed – a feature of how they work, not the headline of who they are.

Atelier Ten does not need to claim sustainability as a value; their entire practice is built around environmental performance. The positioning is implicit in the specialism.

One firm's claim is earned

While not in our dataset, among the firms using 'better world' language, one deserves separate consideration: Arup.

Arup's positioning – 'shaping a better world' – is not a brand statement adopted in response to market conditions. It is a founding philosophy, traceable to Ove Arup's 1970 'Key Speech', in which he set out the firm's aims and the principles by which they might be achieved. The firm's transition to employee ownership through a trust structure is an organisational expression of the same conviction.

The commitment to a better world is not a claim Arup makes about itself. It is a constraint the firm has built into how it operates.

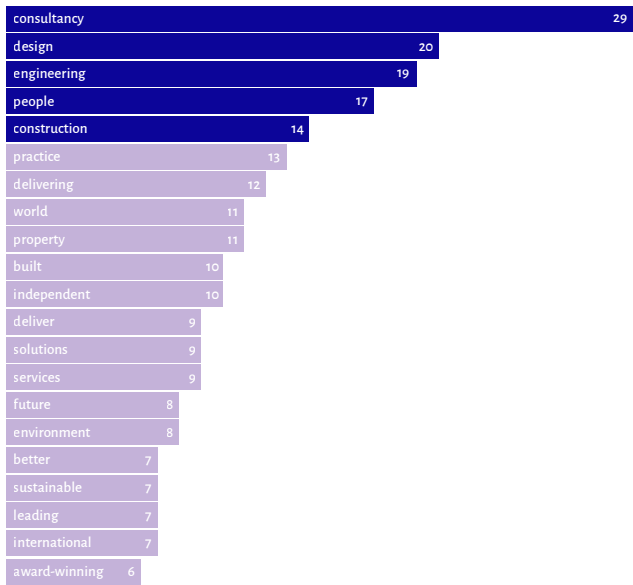
When eight other firms use functionally identical language, a reasonable question follows: what is the equivalent foundation?

For most, the answer is that the purpose is genuinely felt but not yet organisationally embedded. Not a failing – an opportunity. The purpose is a starting point. The work that remains is to make it specific: to connect the aspiration to the firm's own behaviours, structure and way of working, so that the claim becomes authentic rather than borrowed.

The language of sameness

Strip out the firm names and the positioning statements across this dataset become difficult to tell apart. The vocabulary has converged to the point where the sector is effectively writing the same sentence with minor variations – ‘consultancy’ appears 29 times in positioning text, ‘engineering’ 27 times, ‘global’ 17 times, ‘delivering’ 13 times, ‘solutions’ eight.

Figure 2:
A category description is not a positioning. Most common words in positioning text across 75 firms, ranked by frequency.



On Purpose

In purpose statements, the convergence is sharper still. The dominant formula reads: ‘To [engineer/shape/improve] a [better/sustainable] [world/future/society] for [people/communities/our planet].’ A third of firms share this substantially similar purpose.

The blind test

Consider three purpose statements drawn from the dataset. Each belongs to a different firm:

A. ‘Delivering a Better World. We believe infrastructure creates opportunity for everyone.’

B. ‘Deliver projects and programmes that transform businesses, improve people’s lives and benefit the future of our planet.’

C. ‘Help shape a better future for communities; deliver engineering and consultancy solutions that improve lives and shape the built environment.’

Aecom, Turner & Townsend and Pell Frischmann, respectively. While I don’t doubt the sincerity or the virtue of these statements, without the context of their respective logos, they are virtually interchangeable.

Perhaps there’s a structural reason for this.

Strategy processes – particularly run at scale, across multiple geographies and service lines – are designed to build internal alignment. The language that survives a roomful of stakeholders can be the language nobody objects to: abstract, aspirational, inclusive. Almost by definition, language that others are using too.

And perhaps it’s not the province of purpose to create your unique differentiation in the marketplace, but when absent of a clear positioning statement, that’s the job it is being asked to do.

Let’s all Engineer/build a better future/tomorrow

Some firms have landed on positioning ines that are not merely similar but functionally identical to a direct competitor’s. The ‘[verb]-ing a [adjective] [noun]’ formula alone accounts for roughly a quarter of all straplines in the dataset. Common a positioning statement, more a genre convention.

Firm	Message, verb-ing the future*
AtkinsRéalis	Engineering a better future for our planet and its people
Elliott Wood	We Engineer a Better Society
G & T	Building the future, every day.
EXI Group	Building a better tomorrow
Aecom	Delivering a better world
Arcadis	Improving quality of life
Artelia	Designing solutions for a positive life
BWB Consulting	Creating places for everyone, preserving our planet for all
Civic	Creating positive impact for people, place and the planet
Buro Happold	Join us shaping a transformative future
Meinhardt	Transforming Cities, Shaping the Future

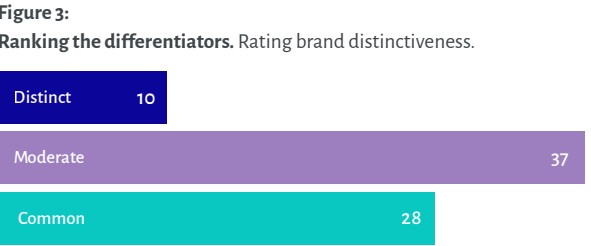
*Note: This is by no means a condemnation these firms for their messaging. Buro Happold, just one example, leads with conventional messaging, but is an interesting example of how the holistic view matters. It has rounded values statements and a client focused purpose: ‘Leading our clients through complexity with courage and care’.

As positioning lines, however, they are blend ing into the wallpaper.

Newmark manages creatively to reinvent the cliché and make it their own with their performance-focused Engineered to Excel™ positioning line.

How distinctive is it?

We rated each firm’s Differentiator strength as Common, Moderate or Distinct. Generic positioning language rates Common; distinctive framing or well-articulated specialism rates Moderate; genuinely distinctive positioning that could not be transplanted to a competitor rates Distinct.



Distinct = distinctive, ownable positioning.
Moderate = some differentiation.
Common = generic or interchangeable language.

The sector’s investment in positioning language produces a genuinely distinctive outcome for barely one in seven firms.

Ten ‘Distinct’ rated firms – What links them is a willingness to say something specific enough to fail the name-swap test.

Firm	Strapline / differentiated positioning or distinctive methodology
RLB	Where People Make Progress
Ramboll	Bright ideas. Sustainable change.
Core Five	Complex issues. Communicated simply.
BB7 Consulting	Creators of safe spaces
Newmark	Engineered to Excel™
AHMM	Economy; Elegance; Delight
Robert Bird Group	Specialists in a world of generalists
Ward Williams	Built differently
Buro Four	Unique People, Positive Influence

3. How valuable are your values
– the Enron test

Famously, Enron’s published corporate values were **Respect, Integrity, Communication and Excellence** – four words that could have belonged to any company and, as it turned out, meant little to Enron.

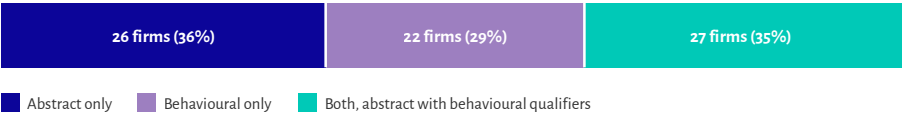
One of the most spectacular corporate failures in recent memory had values indistinguishable from those of the most reputable firms in any sector. Any organisation whose values read like a similar list of abstract nouns should take note.

Across the dataset, five value territories dominate: Collaboration (claimed by 64% of firms), Excellence (53%), Innovation (43%), Integrity (40%) and Sustainability (31%). Ninety-five per cent of the dataset – 71 of 75 firms – claim at least one. These are not differentiators. They are table stakes.

Figure 4:
Value territory frequency across 75 firms. Sized proportional to the number of firms claiming each territory. Counts include morphological variants and behavioural statements



Figure 5: Values architecture distribution
– abstract vs behavioural



Among the 26 firms that maintain both, some create genuine coherence – e.g. AtkinsRéalis expands each named value with a behavioural ‘We’ statement.

Others present different value frameworks on different places, creating the impression of two separate exercises that haven’t been reconciled.

The risk is not just internal confusion.

When behavioural values are not anchored to a distinctive positioning, they tend to converge on the same generic language. Arcadis’ ‘We statement’ values and Stantec’s published set share three of four statements word for word.

Two firms in the Building Top 10, independently, have arrived at virtually identical values statements. The danger then is the words don’t belong to either.

Arcadis (annual report)	Stantec
<i>We put people first</i>	<i>We put people first</i>
<i>We do what is right</i>	<i>We do what is right</i>
<i>We are better together</i>	<i>We are better together</i>
<i>We dare to shape the future</i>	<i>We are driven to achieve</i>

Figure 6:
Values consistency – consistent across touchpoints (31, 41%) vs contradictions identified (44, 59%).



Behavioural (or ‘we’) statments trump single-word labels. Unless they are shared with the rest of the pack.

Speaking out of both sides...

Across the dataset, 44 of 75 firms (59%) appear to present different versions of their values in different places. A firm that says one thing on its ‘About’ page, something different in its annual report, and again on its careers page risk signalling that its values are decorative rather than operational

If the organisation itself cannot remember what it stands for, why should anyone else?

4. How you say it – brand voice

The analysis so far has focused on what firms say. Brand voice is how they say it, and this is where a further, perhaps unexpected, pattern emerges.

We scored all 75 firms across seven dimensions using our proprietary Brand Voice Radar model.

The dimensions measure language clarity, active voice, directness, concrete language, human register, outward/client focus, and ownable language – each weighted by its contribution to distinctiveness, and combined into a single composite score out of 100. The full methodology and dimension definitions are in section 10.

The sector mean composite is 55.3. The spread is wide – from 37.4 to 77.0 – but the bulk of firms cluster in a narrow band. Most of the sector writes in a similar register. It takes effort to break out.

Where the best voice work is coming from

It might be expected that the firms making the most ambitious claims – purpose-led, sustainability-forward, shaping a better world – would produce the most distinctive writing. The data suggests the opposite.

The firms with the strongest voice scores tend to be the technical specialists and independents identified earlier in the positioning analysis. Purpose-led positioning, when it stays generic, is producing generic language.

So the ambition of the claim and the quality of the writing pull in opposite directions.

The sector's lopsided voice

Our radar shape (see right, sector average) tells the story at a glance. Across 75 firms, active voice and directness are strong – the sector writes in grammatical, active sentences of reasonable length. But this is not a differentiator.

The shape collapses inward on the dimensions that matter. Outward/client focus (3.4) is the sector's weakest score by a wide margin. Nine firms score zero – their About pages never once address the reader or frame their services in terms of a client's benefit. Fourteen firms score below two. Nearly a third of the firms are talking exclusively about themselves.

Ownable language is almost as telling. Only 15 of 75 firms score above 5.0. The remainder write in a way that could be any competitor's words.

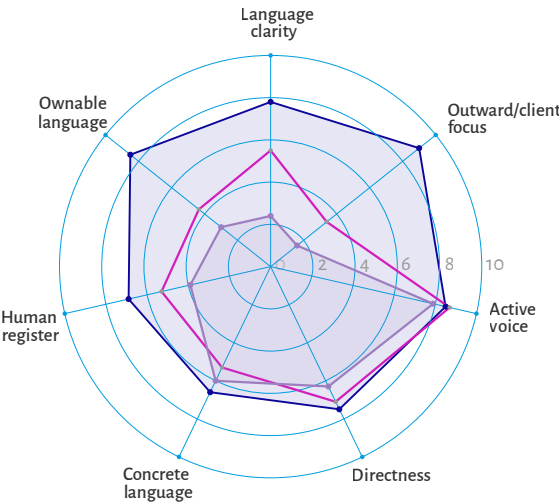
Language clarity sits in the middle. The sector still leans heavily on a shared vocabulary of hollow signifiers – 'solutions', 'innovative', 'excellence', 'delivering', 'holistic' – so widely used they have been emptied of meaning. Our sector buzzword lexicon identifies 173 single words and 32 multi-word phrases. No firm avoids them entirely, but the best use them sparingly and surround them with language that is genuinely their own.

Human register (5.3) separates the firms that sound like people from those that sound like committees. The majority produce copy in a corporate register; measured, impersonal, devoid of personality.

The strongest performers use more conversational phrasing, first-person voice, and the kind of emotive language that sounds as though a person wrote it, not a committee.

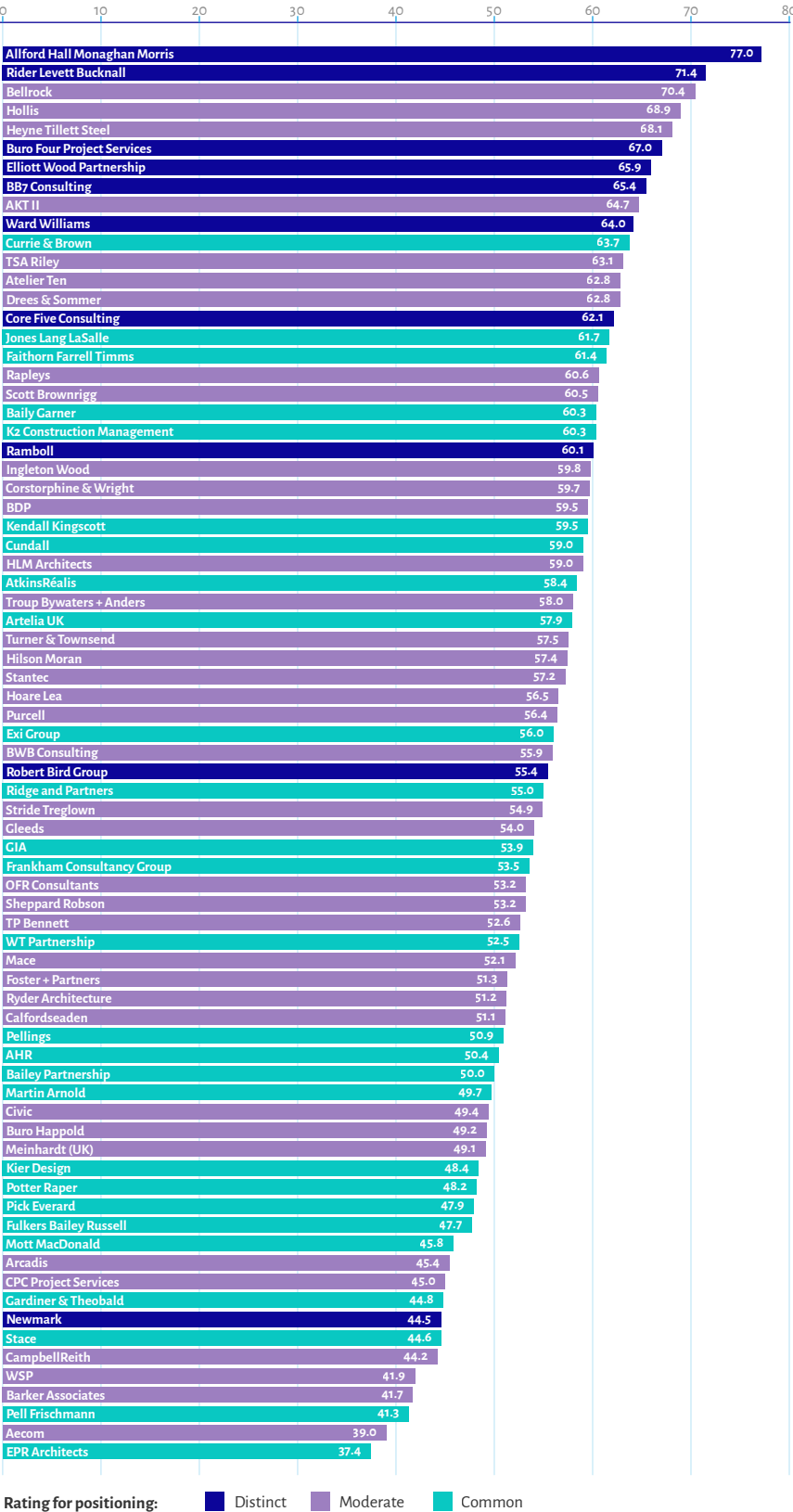
Figure 7 (right): Composite voice scores across 75 firms, ranked highest to lowest. Bars coloured by differentiator rating. A clear positioning difference is not always a predictor of distinctive language and messaging.

Figure 8 (below): Brand Voice Radar. Voice is scored by analysing brand copy on seven coordinates; clarity, outward/client focus, active voice, directness, concrete language, human register, and ownable language.



WSP (41.9) – formerly WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff achieved the lowest composite score among the sector's agency-rebranded firms, largely due to the reliance on industry-common buzzwords and generic language. However, as you'd expect, it has a distinctive visual identity.

■ Sector average (55.3)
■ AHMM (77.0 – highest composite score)
■ WSP (41.9 – agency-rebranded)



What separates ‘Distinct’ from the rest

We grouped the 75 firms by their differentiator rating and compared their voice profiles. The result is clear in figure 9 (below).

On five of the seven dimensions, the three groups score within a point or two of each other. Active voice, directness, concrete language, human register and even language clarity do not reliably separate the Distinct firms from the pack.

Two dimensions that do are ownable language and outward/client focus. Distinct-rated firms average better on ownable language. On outward/client focus, the gap is narrower but consistent.

Distinctive firms are not necessarily better writers in the conventional sense. They are saying something particular—something that could not be said by a competitor—and they frame their language around the reader’s world rather than their own.

Figure 9. Brand Voice Radar – the difference in each dimension’s score by a firm’s differentiator rating. There is a correlation between those rated Distinct for positioning and more client-focused, ownable language.



Connecting with people

This matters for emotional engagement. If brand language is to connect with people, it needs to be specific.

Research into brand personality (Aaker, et al) suggests five distinct dimensions available to any brand – sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness (figure 10). This sector has effectively confined itself to one: competence. The scoring methodology in this audit draws on similar thinking, measuring emotional texture and character alongside the rational register that dominates.

The irony here is that the firms trying hardest to engage emotionally are often the ones writing more impersonally. Many ‘better world’ firms cluster among the highest buzzword density and the lowest scores for human register. They are writing at the level of the sector’s aspirations – inclusive, abstract, carefully non-specific – the result is language nobody would object to, and nobody will remember.

Bellrock and Hollis are the highest-scoring Moderate-rated firms, outperforming several Distinct-rated competitors on composite. Their voice quality is ahead of their apparent positioning strategy.

At the other end, Newmark is rated Distinct for positioning but has the lowest composite of any Distinct firm. Its strapline and values are distinctive, but voice is more corporate and generic.

Key voice findings

The more confident voices write short. The sector average sentence length of 17.1 words tells you most firms haven’t got there yet. The average About page compounds this: heavily self-referential, many score 100% on self-reference, addressing only themselves and never the reader. The best About pages speak to the audience’s concerns, not only the firm’s credentials.

Ownable language is where the gap between Distinct and the rest is widest – 7.2 against 3.7. Outward/client focus follows as the second sharpest separator, with Distinct firms averaging 4.6 against 2.6 for Common. Together, these two dimensions account for almost all the measurable difference between distinctive and generic voices in the sector – and the widest gap of any dimension, from zero to nine, is outward/client focus. Whether a firm’s voice is working or merely existing comes down, more than anything else, to whether it is talking to someone or about itself.

The sector arrived at this convergence without any help. AI will amplify that.

Generative AI is fast becoming a dominant tool in marketing communications.

Used without discipline, it will reach for the sector’s existing vocabulary – the same buzzwords, the same interchangeable messaging.

The blanding will accelerate.

But used with intent – trained on a firm’s own voice principles, governed by our same ‘name-swap test’ applied to human-written copy – AI could become a tool for consistency rather than convergence. The difference between AI that makes your brand bland and AI that makes it consistent is whether you have defined something distinctive to be consistent about.

Figure 10. Dimensions of brand personality, Aaker, et al. The sector is focused on one, competence

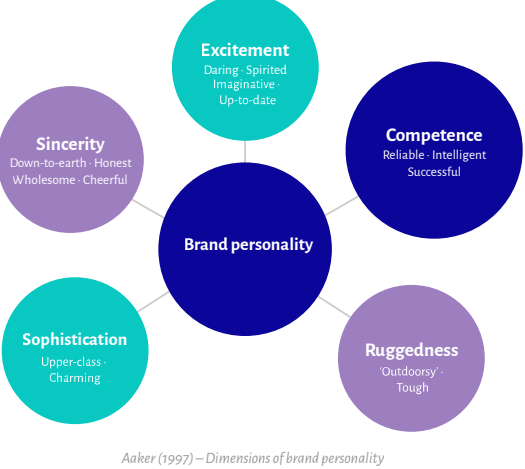


Figure 11: 75 firms by positioning stance model modelling firm's messaging on their bias to technical mastery or purpose, delivery /expertise or unique character or methodology. Technical (left) would represent the most traditional positionings for the sector.



5. The market positioning map

We mapped all 75 firms on two axes: technical mastery to higher purpose (horizontal) and delivery/expertise to character/methodology (vertical). Each firm's position reflects its stated positioning, strapline and lead claim type.

The most crowded zone is technical and delivery-focused – 23 firms (31%). The second-largest is purpose-led and delivery-focused – 20 firms (27%). Together, these two bottom quadrants account for more than half the dataset.

The most distinctly differentiated firms occupy the top half. The technical-plus-character quadrant is home to specialists such as AKT II, Elliott Wood, Core Five and Robert Bird Group – firms that have committed to a discipline and own it. The purpose-led-plus-character quadrant contains AHMM, Atelier Ten, GIA, Ward Williams and Buro Four – firms that combine mission with personality. Arup, not in this dataset but discussed in section 2, would plot at the outer edge of this quadrant. The distance between their position and the nearest firms is a measure of what it takes to own the territory most are simply claiming.

Distinctiveness requires commitment – to a position on both axes, or an unmapped territory. Occupy the middle ground and you are in danger of occupying no memorable ground at all.

The map shows where firms are. Not where the market is going.

The positioning map plots 75 firms against two axes as they exist today. It's a snapshot of the current conversation – what firms are choosing to say about themselves relative to each other.

But sector disruption rarely comes from firms playing within the existing frame. It comes from someone redrawing the frame entirely – redefining what clients should expect, what 'good' looks like, what 'value' is, or what the relationship between consultant and client ought to be.

Nothing in this dataset suggests that shift is imminent. The language is inward-facing, credential-led and cautious. But the firm that finds a way to reframe the conversation with clients – not just to claim a position on this map but to change the axes it's plotted against – would make the current landscape obsolete.

That's beyond the scope of this audit. But it's worth holding in mind:

The most defensible position may not be a better answer to today's question. It may be a better question.

Whoever pioneers that change gets to map this new territory.

6. The exceptions

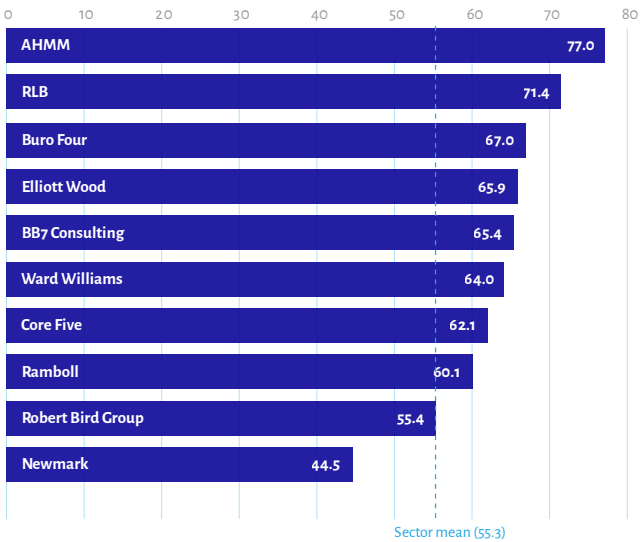
Ten firms –around one in eight of our research set – stand out for saying something genuinely distinctive.

Broadly, they fall into three categories.

1. Distinctive positioning.

AHMM leads the dataset with the highest composite voice score. Their positioning – ‘Economy; Elegance; Delight’ – could only belong to an architecture practice, and their outward/client focus score of 9.0 is the highest of any firm audited. RLB’s ‘Where People Make Progress’ carries layered meaning: people creating ‘progress’, progressing projects, and individuals progressing in their careers. Their ‘Truth; Trust; Together; Tomorrow’ can function as values and positioning – the alliterative sequence implies a narrative from honest assessment through partnership to shared outcomes. At 71.4, their composite is the second highest. Ramboll’s values set (‘Empathy, Insight, Enjoyment’) deliberately avoids the sector’s standard vocabulary. ‘Enjoyment’ is almost unheard of as a corporate value in B2B, let alone construction and engineering. Robert Bird Group’s ‘Specialists in a world of generalists’ is a direct challenge to the sector’s full-service orthodoxy – a positioning that works, if you mean it.

Figure 12: Firms rated Distinct for positioning or methodology – ranked by their composite brand voice score.



2. Proprietary methodology as a brand asset.

A methodology describes your ‘how’ – how the firm works, how it thinks, how it feels to be on the other side of the table.

At best, it speaks to the thing clients are really buying. AHMM is a distinctive case: a design philosophy – ‘Economy; Elegance; Delight’ – a nod to the Vitruvian idea while updating it, its working principles are specific enough that they could not be transplanted. Elliott Wood’s ‘Reveal; Materialise; Impact’ implies a philosophy of uncovering latent potential rather than simply executing a brief. Their mission – ‘Engineering a Better Society’ – is generic, but it’s offset by a distinctive line (‘Structural engineering with attitude’) and a working methodology that are more ownable.

This is an important distinction: a firm can carry sectoral language and still be distinctive, provided it’s anchored by elements that are uniquely its own. BB7’s ‘Creators of safe spaces’ anchors a specialist fire safety consultancy in language that is both ownable and human – their values (‘One team; Keep it clear; Always imagine; Do good, be good’) reinforce that same character.

3. Distinctive character.

Newmark’s values – ‘Join Forces; Stay Nimble; Be Human; Face Forward’ – read as instructions, not aspirations. ‘Be Human’ is a striking choice for a global real estate advisory firm. Buro Four’s values – ‘Emotional intelligence; Collaboration; Independence; Joy’ – are remarkable for including ‘Joy’, a word with apparently no business appearing in a B2B consultancy’s brand. It is all the more distinctive for it. Ward Williams describes itself as ‘curators of possibility’ – language that risks preciousness. But it succeeds in being impossible to confuse with anyone else.

What successful firms share is specificity.

Three quarters of firms cannot make a clean pass on the name-swap test. For barely one in seven does their overall positioning achieve something genuinely distinctive.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strongest positioning lines take their distinctiveness from the discipline itself – AHMM’s could only belong to an architecture practice, BB7’s only to a fire safety consultancy.

The weaker ones assert a quality without anchoring it in what the firm actually does.

7. Distinctive branding, generic positioning

Several firms have undergone high-profile rebrands led by internationally recognised agencies.

Arcadis (Interbrand), AtkinsRéalis (Interbrand), WSP (Sid Lee), Mott MacDonald (Interbrand), Ramboll (Kontrapunkt). The results are visually impressive – Interbrand’s award-winning AtkinsRéalis branding is particularly visually distinctive.

This matters. A distinctive, memorable visual identity is half the brand.

A distinctive look commands attention, can signal change, and ambition. It tells clients, and talent, that the firm takes itself seriously. The best of these have produced genuinely excellent design work.

While visual identity may be as important as what the firm says – it is not more important.

Of firms with agency-led rebrands, only one achieved a Distinct differentiator rating. Ramboll worked with Danish consultancy Kunde & Co, and arguably the result is distinctive precisely because it avoided the language that others have tended to produce.

This select group’s mean voice score is 49.7 – below the sector average of 55.3. Behind polished visual systems, the verbal identity is indistinguishable from the sector at large.

There is perhaps a structural explanation.

Many strategy processes are designed to build consensus across geographies, service lines and leadership groups. Language that survives may be inclusive, aspirational and non-specific. The same qualities that make it acceptable to everyone make it distinctive to no one. A differentiated position requires committing to something that someone, somewhere, might object to.

Firm	Positioning line	Agency	Composite rating for competitive positioning differentiation
AtkinsRéalis	Engineering a better future for our planet and its people	Interbrand	Moderate
WSP	Future ready	Sid Lee	Common
Mott MacDonald	Delivering excellence	Interbrand	Moderate
Arcadis	Create a planet positive future	Interbrand/internal	Common
Ramboll	Bright ideas. Sustainable change.	Kunde & Co	Distinct
Aecom	We deliver a better world	Agency confirmed (undisclosed)	Common
Stantec	Together we turn what if into we did	Internal team	Moderate

Agency attribution is based on publicly available case studies and portfolio listings as of March 2026

Notably, the ten firms rated ‘Distinct’ show no evidence of involvement from the large, internationally recognised brand agencies. Their distinctiveness comes from internal clarity – a conviction that finds its way into language.

This is not an argument against agencies. Far from it.

If you could match the visual identity quality of agency-rebranded firms with equally distinctive positioning and messaging, the resulting brand would be a powerful competitive force.

But distinctive positioning tends to originate not in one morning’s workshop, but in gaining a deeper understanding of what a firm does differently, and why that matters to clients.

It’s a culture question before it’s a language question. They cannot replicate what makes you you — the specific value you deliver to clients and the conviction that drives you.

Many firms in this study haven’t yet done the work to find out what that is and surface it.

Which makes the question worth asking, before the brief is written: not ‘what do we want to say?’ but ‘what do we actually deliver at our best, and what do we believe – specifically – that nobody else in our competitive set believes?’

8. The commercial case for distinctiveness

McKinsey's State of Marketing Europe 2026 report, surveying 500 senior marketing leaders, found that brand is now the number one CMO priority – ahead of generative AI, ahead of performance marketing.

Just as the market recognises that brand drives distinctiveness, most firms in this study have found nothing distinctive to say.

Seeking distinctive positioning in all the wrong places.

Construction and engineering consultancies compete fiercely on technical capability.

Yet when it comes to brand positioning, many have converged on a narrow, interchangeable vocabulary that undermines that differentiation. Over a third rate Common. And a further 51% rate Moderate. More than half present contradictory values across touchpoints.

When a prospective client reads three firms' About pages and can't tell them apart, the decision defaults to price, proximity, or personal relationships.

The commercial consequences run deeper than pitching for business. Distinctive brands can command better fees – price becomes one factor among several rather than the deciding factor. They attract better talent too: the sector competes for the same engineers, surveyors and technical professionals across the same firms. Generic employer language – 'our people are our greatest asset', 'a collaborative and inclusive culture' – gives a candidate no real reason to choose you over the firm next door offering the same salary.

Clear positioning also pays its way in a pitch process. When your brand is doing its job, you arrive at a pitch already differentiated – the client has a sense of who you are before you walk in the room. When it's not, every credentials presentation starts from zero.

Every proposal (and every person) has to work harder to establish a position your brand should have built already. That's business development time and cost that distinctive firms are not wasting.

Too often, branding is treated as a one-and-done exercise – a project with a start date and a delivery date, guidelines produced, website launched, and everyone moves on. Without strong foundations, it leads, almost inevitably, to the next rebrand a few years later. Brand is not a project. It's a practice – an everyday activity that lives in every proposal, every conversation with a client, the job of everyone who speaks on behalf of the firm.

A distinctive look without a distinctive voice is half a brand. A purpose without a positioning is half the proposition. Listing values without connecting them to behaviours, work half done. The sector has invested in the visible, deliverable parts of branding while leaving the harder, ongoing work of brand undone.

A brand strategy that begins and ends with purpose is a building with one wall.

Purpose answers why you exist – but a complete brand model requires more. Four working elements: purpose, positioning (what you offer), personality (who you are) and principles (how you behave). Each does different work, and they need to converge on a single, distinctive brand idea at its core. Some firms in this study have invested more heavily in purpose – and wrapped it in strong visual identity. But at the expense of the other elements, which are generic or underexamined.

That's not a criticism. It is a diagnosis – and it points to the work that remains. This audit began as a study of language convergence in the sector and led, inevitably, to the structures beneath it. Fixing the language without addressing the missing elements of the strategy would be repainting the facade.

Figure 13: A brand strategy model, Garrett Reil. Implementing a more complete brand strategy model will address the shortcomings outlined in this report



Model © Garrett Reil Brand Consultants

AI and the positioning gap

One territory remains unmapped, surprising in its absence. Legal services, accounting and management consulting have all begun to position AI-augmentation as a client-facing differentiator – promising faster due diligence, automated compliance, predictive analytics. Some have brand-named bespoke models. Construction and engineering consultancies, by contrast, have little specific to say on the subject.

Across all 75 firms in this study, no one is making AI or machine learning a central part of its messaging. Five mention technology in passing, none stakes a concrete claim. Nobody is telling clients that AI changes how they deliver, what they can predict, or why their advice is sharper for it.

The gap is not in capability. AI-augmented design, energy modelling, cost forecasting and programme management are already in use across the sector.

The gap is in positioning: firms are adopting the tools without claiming an advantage. In a sector where so much messaging defaults to the generic, the first firm to articulate a credible, specific AI proposition – not 'we use technology' but 'here's what it means for your projects' – would occupy unmapped territory.

That said, if other sectors are any guide, the window will be brief.

AI will follow the same path as sustainability – from differentiator to table stakes faster than most firms will move. The firms best placed to claim it, and to hold any position beyond it, are the ones that have already done the harder work: understanding what they specifically deliver, and building a brand distinctive enough to make any claim credible.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

The firms in this study are not struggling.

They are successful organisations – winning work, retaining clients, recruiting well.

The convergence highlighted here is not a crisis.

But it is a lost opportunity.

Limiting how clearly firms can stand out, stand for something – and build a brand that works before you're in the room and stays after you leave.

Ten firms in this study break the pattern and they do it in different ways

- Through positioning specific enough to survive the name-swap test.
- Through proprietary methodologies that describe not just what they do, but how they think.
- Through behavioural values precise enough to shape decisions, rather than decorate a wall.

For some, a genuine specialism does the work – clearly communicated externally.

What they share is the discipline of saying something concrete, and the willingness to say something that not everyone will agree with.

It proves it can be done. But, it doesn't make it easy

The question, then, is what separates those firms.

What follows is not a checklist – or a quick fix. These are connected challenges: strategic, structural, and cultural – all pointing toward the same outcome: a positioning distinctive enough to do real work in the market.

Rethink your rebrand.

If you are investing in a rebrand, start with your clients – not a creative brief.

Before the agency is appointed, before the brief is written, one question is worth answering honestly: What do you deliver, at your best, that nobody else in your competitive set delivers – and can you demonstrate it, rather than simply claim it?

That answer doesn't come from a single workshop. It requires genuine inquiry into what you do differently – and why that matters to the people you are trying to reach. The visual identity and the verbal identity require equal investment.

A distinctive look with a generic voice is half a brand – you can see the difference, but you're not told what it means.

You started with why, keep going.

Purpose-led positioning is a legitimate starting point. But if your 'why' sounds like everyone else's, it is not doing the work of differentiation. The next step – one most firms in this study have not followed – is to connect the purpose to what is specifically true of your firm: your way of working, your behaviours, the specific commitments your clients would notice if you broke them.

A purpose without that connection is aspiration. With it, it becomes a position.

Stop claiming table-stakes values.

If a value appears on a competitor's website – and it almost certainly does – it is not earning its place on yours. Retire it, or earn it back by translating the abstract label into a concrete, testable behaviour specific to your firm.

'We do the right thing' is a starting point. 'We tell clients what they need to hear, not what they want to hear' is the thing itself. Then audit where your values actually appear: on your website, your careers page, your annual report, your proposals. Fifty-nine per cent of firms in this study say different things in different places.

If your firm can't remember what it stands for, nobody else will.

Positioning starts with your client's needs, not your credentials.

The firms rated Distinct in this study have articulated what it feels like to be on the other side of the table from them – the worry they remove, the confidence they instil, the way they handle the difficult conversation when a project has gone wrong. That is what clients are actually buying. Now read your About page as a prospective client would. Count the sentences that address the reader not the firm. If the answer is none, start there. The gap between the lowest and the highest-scoring on outward focus – from zero to nine – is the widest of any dimension measured, and the clearest indicator of whether a brand is working or merely existing.

Replace abstract nouns with testable commitments.

'We deliver excellence' is an assertion. 'Every conversation starts with the question your client hasn't thought to ask yet' is a promise a client can verify. The shift from nouns to verbs is the most reliable indicator of whether your language is doing real work – or decorative work. Apply the name-swap test to every major piece of brand copy:

if it reads as credible with a competitor's name on it, it is not yet distinctive enough.

If you use AI to produce communications, define something distinctive first.

AI enforces whatever already exists. Used without discipline, it will reach for your category's vocabulary – the same buzzwords, the same interchangeable purpose statements. The blinding accelerates.

AI used with intent – trained on your voice, governed by clear principles becomes a tool for consistency rather than sameness.

The difference is simple: have you defined something worth being consistent about?

What this requires is not a more compelling way of saying the same things.

It's a willingness to define, with precision, what is genuinely different about your firm, and to express it clearly enough that it can be recognised, understood, and used.

Because when that work isn't done, the outcome is predictable.

Language converges. Positionings converge. The differences that matter to clients become difficult to see.

And where that happens, your brand, instead of doing the hard work for you, quietly steps aside.

Methodology

Dataset

The audit examined 75 construction and engineering consultancies from the Building Top 150 Consultants 2025 ranking (September 2025, listed by UK fee income). For each firm, we reviewed publicly available, externally facing text: website About page, strapline, purpose or mission statement, listed values and – where appropriate – careers page, service descriptions and annual report extracts. All brand text samples were collected to a minimum threshold of 300 words per firm to ensure scoring reliability. Data was collected in March–April 2026.

The materials represent how firms present themselves to clients, talent and the market. Internal communications and consistency across other channels (proposals, presentations, broader social media) were not included.

Differentiator rating

Each firm's competitive positioning was rated as Distinct, Moderate or Common using a name-swap test. Distinct indicates distinctive, ownable positioning that could not be transplanted to a competitor without feeling wrong. Moderate reflects some differentiation or a well-articulated specialism. Common indicates generic or interchangeable language. The test was applied to straplines, values, positioning statements and About page openings.

The Brand Voice Radar

Brand voice was evaluated using the proprietary Brand Voice Radar model, scoring seven dimensions on a 0–10 scale:

Language clarity: density of sector-specific buzzwords and hollow signifiers relative to total word count. We compiled a lexicon of 173 single words and 32 multi-word phrases prevalent across the sector. Lower density yields higher scores.

Active voice: proportion of passive voice constructions detected through syntactic pattern matching. More active voice signals ownership and confidence.

Directness: average sentence length in words. Shorter, declarative sentences indicate clarity and commitment. Scores are calibrated against plain-English benchmarks.

Concrete language: ratio of abstract nouns (e.g. 'excellence', 'commitment', 'passion') to concrete, observable terms (actions, outcomes, places, numbers). More tangible language scores higher.

Human register (20%): emotional texture, conversational phrasing, first-person stance, and sensory or informal vocabulary. Measures whether the writing sounds like a person or a committee.

Outward/client focus: balance between self-referential language and client-oriented framing. Scores reflect use of second-person address, benefit-led phrasing, and the proportion of sentences that face outward rather than inward.

Ownable language: qualitative assessment via the name-swap test. Could this copy appear on a competitor's website without anyone noticing? Scores range from 0–2 (entirely generic) through 5–6 (some distinctive elements) to 9–10 (highly distinctive, unmistakably this firm's voice).

Scoring methodology

Six of the seven dimensions – Language clarity, Active voice, Directness, Concrete language, Human register and Outward/client focus – were scored quantitatively by the Brand Voice Radar scoring engine, applied consistently to the full text corpus of 75 firms. Ownable language was assessed qualitatively using the name-swap test, scored against the rubric above.

Composite score

The composite Brand Voice Radar score is the weighted mean of all seven dimension scores, multiplied by ten and expressed on a 0–100 scale.

Weightings reflect each dimension's contribution to overall brand voice distinctiveness. Language clarity and Human register carry the greatest weight (20% each) because they most directly determine whether a firm's voice feels distinct and human. Concrete language and Ownable language are weighted at 15% each, reflecting their role in grounding claims and resisting generic substitution.

The composite is a relative indicator within this dataset, designed to surface patterns across the sector rather than to serve as an absolute measure of brand quality.

Sector statistics

The sector mean composite is 55.3 Dimension averages are:

Dimension	Mean	Median	Range
Language clarity	5.5	5.6	2.4–7.8
Active voice	8.7	8.8	5.3–10.0
Directness	7.1	7.3	3.0–9.2
Concrete language	5.3	5.6	0.9–7.7
Human register	5.3	5.3	3.4–9.9
Outward/client focus	3.4	3.3	0.0–9.0
Ownable language	4.4	4.0	2.0–9.0

Active voice is the strongest dimension for 70 of 75 firms. Outward/client focus is the weakest for 43. Nine firms score zero on outward/client focus.

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The ten firms rated Distinct have not commissioned, reviewed or approved this report or their inclusion within it. All analysis represents the independent assessment and professionopinion of the author, based on publicly available materials.

Data accuracy

All brand copy, straplines, purpose statements and values were sourced from publicly available, externally facing materials as of March-April 2026, including firm websites, LinkedIn profiles and annual reports where available. Firms' brand communication materials may have changed since that date.

Firms published copy is taken on face value and Garrett Reil Brand Consultants accepts no liability for inaccuracies arising from subsequent changes to firms' published materials, nor for decisions made on the basis of the findings in this report.

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, any factual corrections or clarifications are welcome and will be reviewed for future revisions.

Agency attribution

Agency attribution in Section 7 is based on publicly available agency case studies, portfolio listings and press coverage as of March 2026. The brand materials currently live on each firm's website may differ – in some cases significantly – from the work as delivered and reported at launch. Brand copy, straplines and positioning language evolve after initial delivery, and the voice and positioning analysis in this report reflects what was publicly available at the time of audit, not necessarily the original agency output.

No claim is made that the list of agency-attributed firms is exhaustive, or indeed that the current live materials represent the agency's work in its intended or original form.

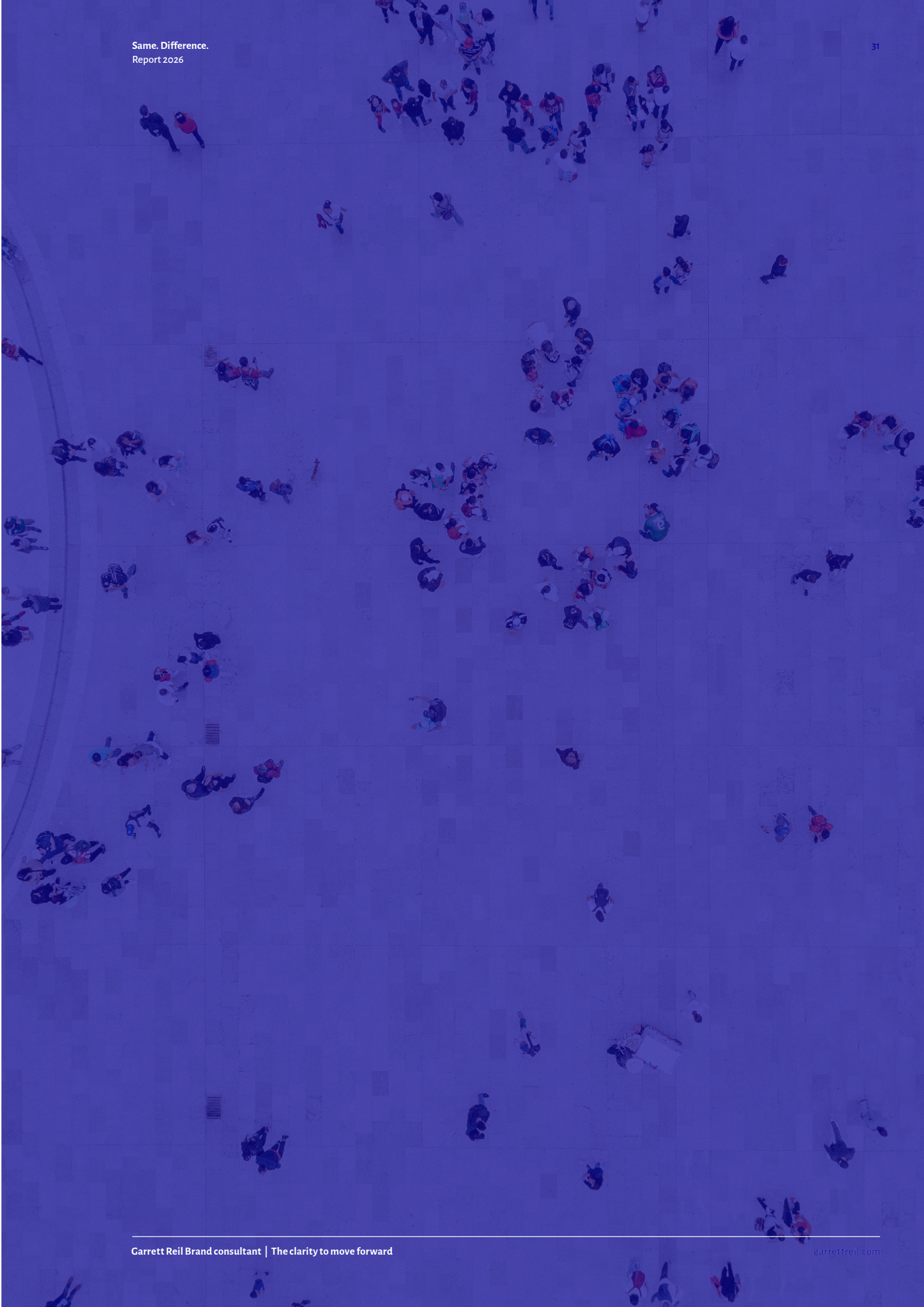
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Brand is not a cost. It's a path to sustainable competitive advantage. When you put it to work, it does three things for you: differentiates you in a crowded market, aligns your people around a common purpose, and builds the kind of reputation that compounds over time – getting you on longlists, tipping decisions when technical scores are close, making clients pick up the phone to you rather than the firm next door.

That happens when insight, strategy and creative thinking work together. That's what I bring.

The clarity to move forward.

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