



**Who says branded content can't sell hard?**

The story of Hostelworld's Unexpected Guests

Marketing Society Excellence Awards

Category – Branded Content



## Summary

As the only hostel specialist, Hostelworld needed to sell this form of accommodation to young travellers. And to do that it had to overcome their preconceptions that hostels were dirty, noisy and unsafe by explaining that in fact they were clean and luxurious.

At first glance that didn't seem like a job for 'Branded content', which is supposed to be subtly branded and entertaining rather than hard-sell.

But by inviting a series of famous, topical celebrities to stay in hostels and document their adventures, we were able to create video content that not only engaged millions of young people but also landed hard-selling hostel proof points.

'Youth hostelling with with Chris Eubank' brought an internet in-joke to life. 'In da hostel with 50 Cent' saw the bankrupt rapper showing us around his new crib – a Barcelona hostel. And our Charlie Sheen clickbait grabbed viewers' attention before revealing that like Charlie, hostels was actually much nicer than they thought.

All this not only engaged out audience at scale, but changed their perceptions of hostels, driving visits to Hostelworld's site and app and helping the business accelerate its growth.

Who says branded content can't sell hard?

The story of Hostelworld's 'Unexpected Guests' suggests it can.

**Word count: 204**



## **Introduction**

We're often told that 'Content' needs to feel like the opposite of advertising. It can't overtly sell, because selling is incompatible with generating engagement.

This is the story of a campaign that challenges that assumption.

### **Introducing Hostelworld - 'The booking.com of hostels'**

You might not have heard of Hostelworld. We hadn't when they came to us.

Simply put, they are the booking.com of hostels. In 1999 the founders foresaw the shift to booking online. So they built a website, signed up a load of hostels and were soon growing in leaps and bounds. By 2015 natural momentum (and the acquisition of all their smaller competitors) had made them the dominant hostel specialist, responsible for the majority of bookings in the market.

That meant they now represented hostels. And in order to keep growing they had to convince young travellers to stay in hostels rather than Airbnbs or budget hotels.

So that's what they asked us to help them do.

### **The problem – negative perceptions of hostels**

Quant data showed that a mere one in twelve 16-34 year old travellers had stayed at a hostel during the last twelve months<sup>1</sup>. So there was a massive pool of customers to convert.

However, the data also proved it would be hard to win these people over. They were convinced that hostels would be noisy, crowded, dirty, unsafe and lacking in amenities<sup>2</sup>. They worried about drunken idiots waking them up in the middle of the night, being forced to use filthy sheets and towels and having their stuff nicked if they left it out in the open.

Basically, they thought staying in hostels would be horrible.

### **The role of comms – showcase the modern hostel experience**

Luckily, in recent years hostels had changed for the better. Branded hostel chains like Wombats had upped the ante and the best properties were now more like affordable boutique hotels. On top of their social, friendly vibe they had quiet dorms with clean linen, secure lockers for your stuff, amazing common areas, swimming pools, free WIFI... even private rooms.

Modern Hostels were far more luxurious than young people thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Phocuswright Global Hostel Marketplace Study 2015

<sup>2</sup> Research Now Brand Tracking 2015



We just had to communicate the product points that proved this fact.

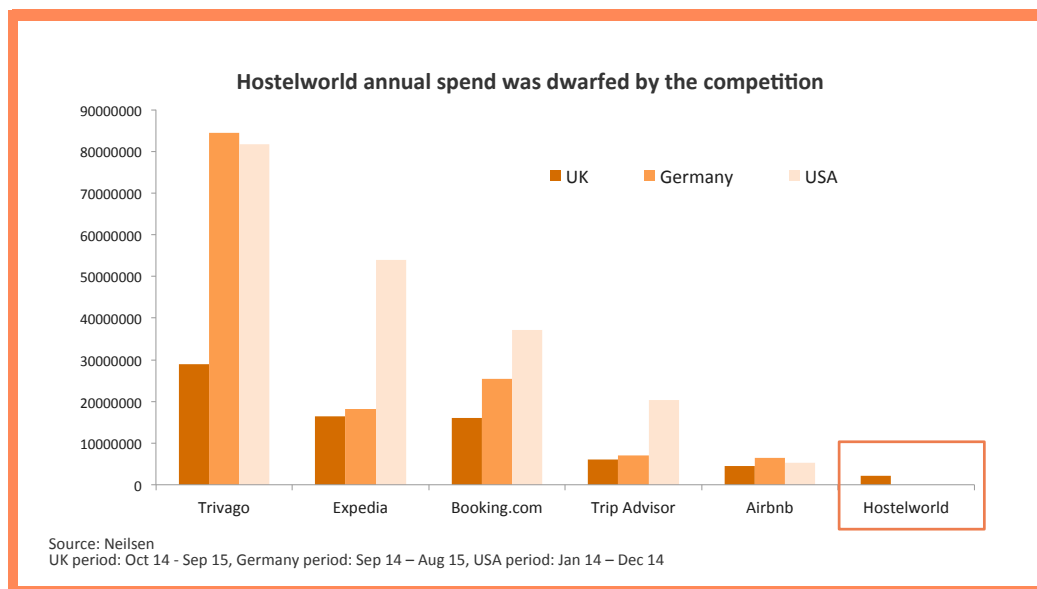


### That doesn't sound much like a job for branded content!

At first glance, this seemed like the very opposite of a branded content brief. Conventional wisdom says that content needs must be subtly branded, designed to create engagement and associate the brand with a lifestyle, not deliver a hardworking list hard-sell product proof points<sup>3</sup>!

That's initially what we thought too, but there were some compelling reasons to try and make branded content work.

First there was the scale of our budget, or rather, the lack of it. Our total global spend was just a few million Euros a year – far, far below that of our competitors.



<sup>3</sup> "Why your branded content shouldn't always be about your brand" (Content Marketing Institute 13/3/14)  
"Use content marketing to sell a lifestyle, not a product" (Huffington Post 18/2/15)  
"Want to be successful with content marketing? Don't sell." (Forbes 19/2/16)  
"Why hard selling doesn't work on social media" (Chroniclesrepublic.com 23/5/17)  
"Why we need sponsored entertainment not branded content" (Campaign 17/5/17)



Given that we wouldn't be able to buy huge amounts of attention for our message we would have to earn it. The right branded content idea – if we could find it – might be able to help with that.

Secondly, there were the media habits of our young target audience to consider: specifically their love of consuming content on their phones.

**Hostelworld's audience loved consuming content on their mobile phones**

	% of 16-34s	Index vs all
Media use - mobile phone	<b>99</b>	110
Use phone to go online regularly	<b>91</b>	<b>139</b>
Phone would be 'Most missed' media device	63	<b>164</b>
Use phone to look at social media sites at least weekly	90	<b>132</b>
Use phone to watch short video clips at least weekly	63	<b>184</b>
Share videos or photos online	54	<b>153</b>

Source: OfCom media use and attitudes 2015

Given these figures, it made sense to try and get our messages about hostels into mobile newsfeeds. The right branded content idea might be able to help us do this.

It was clear that despite the apparent challenges, we needed to find a branded content solution to the brief.

### **Our branded content idea – 'Unexpected guests'**

We turned our attention to the kind of content our audience were consuming.

What were their social media habits?

It immediately became obvious that they had a penchant for following celebrities. Social media gave them a chance to get an insider view of celebrity lifestyles. They loved seeing the clips their favourite stars posted of the parties they attended, the people they hung out with, the pets they adored, the places they stayed...

And that gave us an idea:

*We would get a series of celebrities that you'd never expect to see in hostels to stay there and post video evidence of their stay (during which we'd be able to show off all our product proof points).*

The 'Unexpected Guests' campaign was born.



## 2015 – Getting off the ground

We kicked off our branded content series with a celebrity in-joke.

In the 1999 cult comedy series ‘I’m Alan Partridge’ there is a scene in which Alan desperately pitches terrible ideas for TV shows in an attempt to revive his flagging career. His final outrageous suggestion is ‘Youth Hostelling with Chris Eubank’.



This awful sounding program had been a pop culture in-joke every since, and comedy lovers often took to twitter to ask Chris Eubank (himself a prolific tweeter) whether he would ever do it for real. In fact Chris had recently responded to one of the tweets and shown he didn't even understand the joke of which he was part!



We had our first Unexpected Guest.

We would send Chris Eubank to stay in a Youth Hostel.

### Unexpected Guest 1 - ‘Youth Hostelling with Chris Eubank’

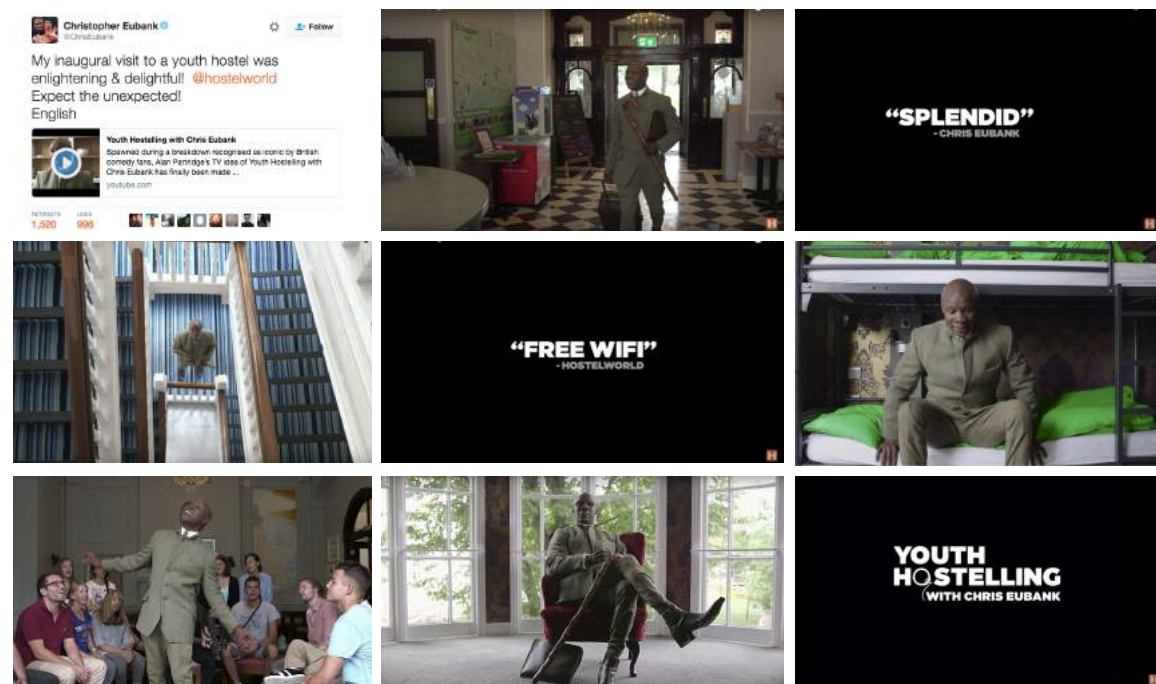
In our first piece of content Chris Eubank, wearing his trademark three-piece-suit and monocle, discovered just how luxurious modern hostels can be.



He tried out the comfy beds, admired the period architecture, logged-into the complimentary WIFI and hung out with the friendly guests. All these proof points were elegantly delivered in a 60 second stretch of comedy gold.

When Chris tweeted the content out to his followers newsfeeds exploded with the news that 'Youth Hostelling with Chris Eubank' had finally become a reality.

(Well, the trailer for it had at least).



You can watch the film here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGG5OhEcpOQ>

## 2016 – Taking the content global

Youth Hostelling with Chris Eubank was a great success (more on that later), but views and shares were heavily biased to the UK. Having proven that branded content could simultaneously engage our audience and deliver hard sell product points we wanted to see if we could take the approach global.

This led us to a breaking story about the world famous rapper 50 Cent, who had just declared himself bankrupt.

Fiddy was being sued for putting his ex-girlfriend's sex tape online and was claiming he was out of cash to avoid paying damages.

This was already a trending story, with people joking that he should change his name to '5 Cent' and Fiddy himself joining in with posts about his supposed financial hardship.





It was perfect. Fiddy's taste for the finer things in life was legendary. His \$7M mansion had been the central feature in the highest rated episode of MTV's Cribs.

But now he was bankrupt, so he needed luxury on a budget. And that was exactly what we could offer.

### Unexpected Guest 2 - 'In da hostel with 50 Cent'

Our second piece of branded content took 50 Cent to Barcelona, where he hosted a mock episode of MTV's cribs entitled 'In da hostel with 50 Cent'.

During the 4 minute film Fiddy walked viewers through every last detail of the hostel interior: the amazing common room ('Twelve thousand square feet'), the pool ('Community vibes'), the beautifully clean dorms ('Tour bus lifestyle'), the secure lockers, the private rooms ('Where the magic happens') and even the on-site bar.

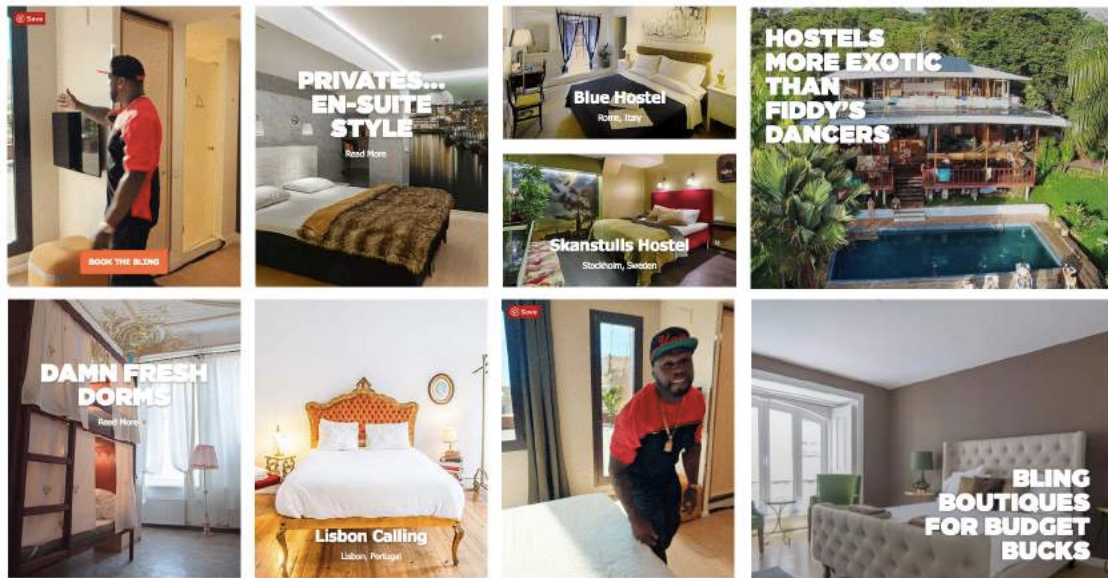






You can watch the film here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=espJ7oIHek>.

We leveraged the power of Fiddy himself as a media channel to launch the content to his 55 million followers<sup>4</sup>. Then we pushed the content on facebook, instagram, YouTube, and through publishing partners like Ladbible and Social Chain's influencer network. All the content led viewers back to a special landing page where they could see more in-depth articles about hostels offering 'All the bling without the sting'.



## 2017 – Parodying the tricks of online content publishers

For our third guest we wanted to move the campaign on again. To do so we decided to parody the publishers of 'Clickbait' style content, which was becoming a rampant internet epidemic.

We're sure you know what we mean by Clickbait – those attention grabbing articles that always start with a salacious headline about some outrageous celebrity antics. Articles like these...



Whilst slightly immoral, clickbait was undoubtedly effective. So we decided to parody it with our next unexpected guest – Mr Charlie Sheen.

<sup>4</sup> 38M facebook, 8M Twitter, 8.5M Instagram



Thanks to his party-animal reputation Charlie was exactly the sort of celebrity that tended to feature in clickbait content, but that wasn't the only thing that interested us about him.

We were interested in the fact that Charlie had recently turned over a new leaf. He had 'Gone clean'.



So Charlie, like hostels, was nicer than people thought.

We realised we could use this fact to draw people in and then deliver our unexpected product messages.

### Unexpected Guest 3 - 'Clickbait Charlie'

We created 6 pieces of clickbait content and played them out across both Charlie's channels and our own.

You can watch all the films here: <https://vimeo.com/253634524>

'CHARLIE SHEEN SLEEPS WITH SEVEN PEOPLE IN HOSTEL' turned out to be about Charlie have a nap in a quiet and peaceful hostel dorm.







'CHARLIE SHEEN IN 8AM HOSTEL SHOTS SHOCKER' was about Charlie enjoying some healthy wheatgrass shots in a rather nice-looking hostel bar.



'CHARLIE SHEEN COOKS UP IN HOSTEL' was about Charlie cooking a nice dinner for his fellow travellers in the well-appointed hostel kitchen.



'CHARLIE SHEEN BASHES BISHOP IN HOSTEL' was about Charlie defeating a fellow hosteller at chess in a classy-looking common area.





‘SHEEN’S PRIVATE BINGE IN HOSTEL’ was about Charlie retrieving a stash of sweeties from the safe in his plush private room.



And ‘CHARLIE SHEEN BEATS TEEN IN HOSTEL WITH BAT’ was about Charlie playing ping-pong in the hostel’s atmospheric games room.



This content was pushed out on YouTube, facebook, instagram and Snap, as well as running on selected partner sites (Ladbible, Huffington Post etc). The Social Chain’s influencer network also helped spread the content far and wide.

### **Results – branded content that sells hard**

The results of the ‘Unexpected Guests’ campaign proves that content can engage consumers at scale whilst still delivering hard selling product proof points.

We succeeded in reaching our audience, globally, on a very tight budget. Between them, Eubank, Fiddy and Sheen earned almost 2 BILLION media impressions across 23 markets<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Gorkana – combined potential reach of all articles generated



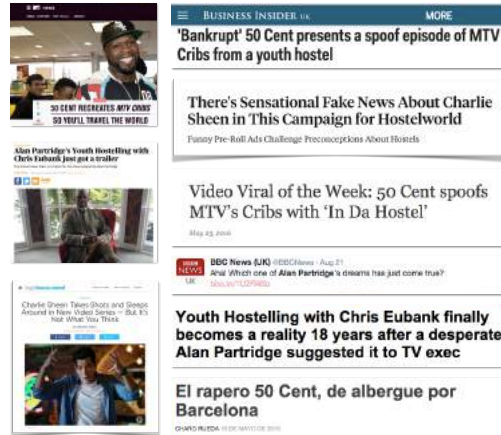
## The Unexpected Guests content earned our audience's attention - globally

# 1.96 BILLION

media impressions earned



Orange countries show where coverage was generated  
Source: Gorkana



The content was highly engaging. Across the 56 million views delivered, completion rates were consistently high (30-40%), far outstripping industry benchmarks<sup>6</sup>.

Further proof of how engaging the campaign was could be seen in the interactions it generated. There were 243,796 social engagements with the content<sup>7</sup>.

## The Unexpected Guests content was highly engaging

# 56 million

 views

Completion rates hitting **40%**

# 243,796

social engagements  
(reactions, comments, likes, shares)



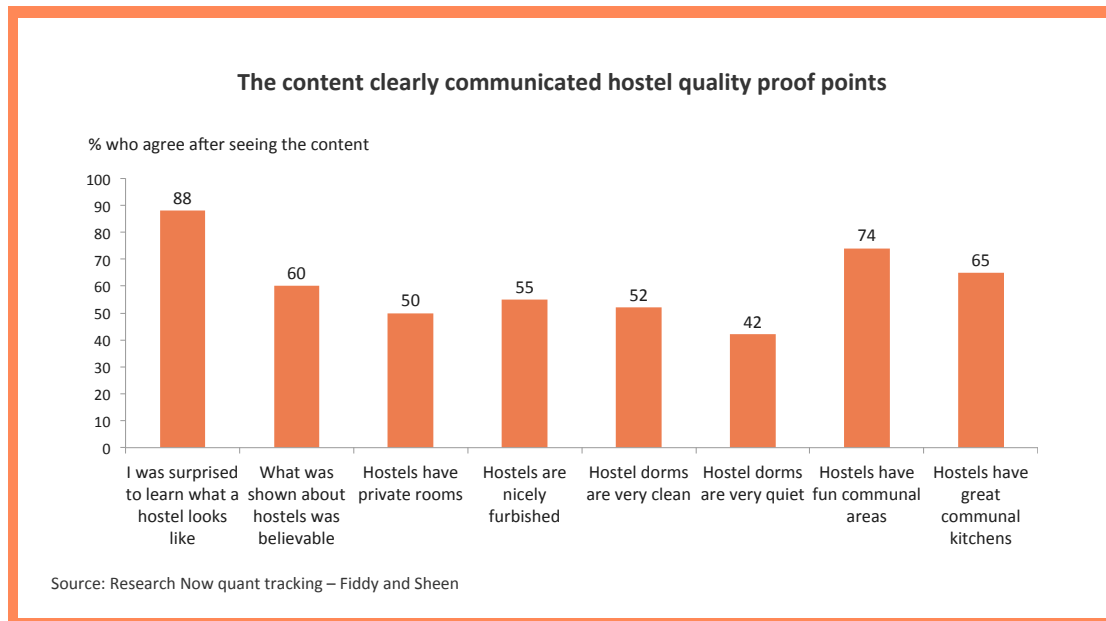
Source: Social Bakers / Hostelworld media team

But we didn't just generate views and engagement, we delivered hard-sell facts about the quality of modern hostels. The content really surprised in our audience as they took out the proof points we wanted them to appreciate.

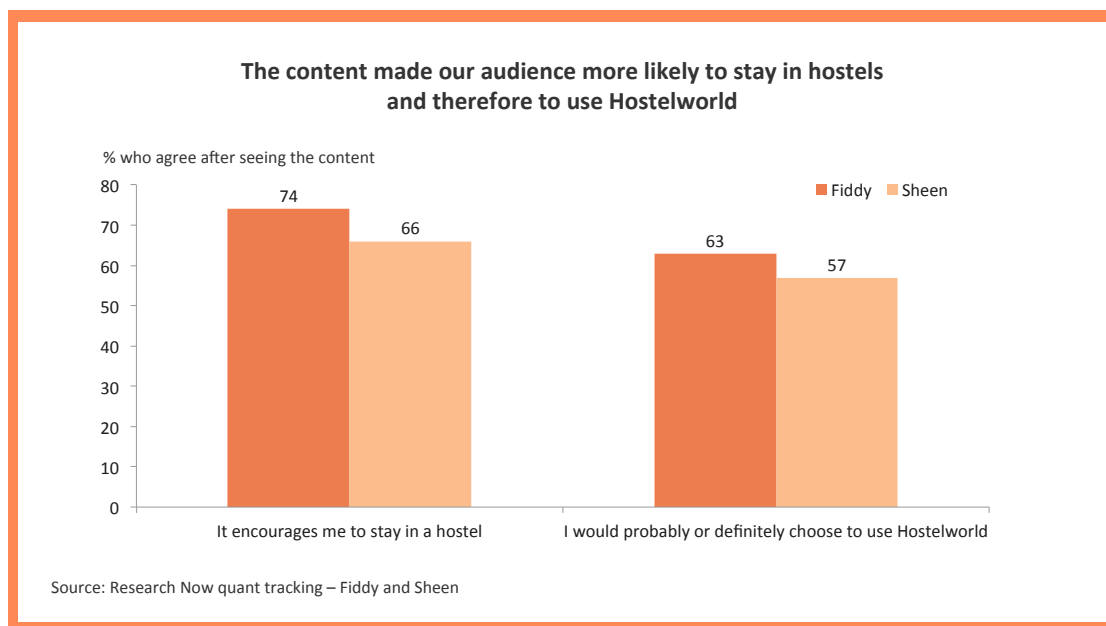
<sup>6</sup> Hostelworld media team: fb completed view benchmark <15% (Salesforce), YouTube completed view benchmark is around 27% (Strike Social)

<sup>7</sup> Social Bakers – engagements defined as likes, shares or comments





This meant the content was capable of changing our audience’s views, increasing their intention to stay at a hostel in the future, and making them more likely to use Hostelworld over other online booking sites.



And this response fed directly through into real world behaviour. The content directly drove 1,234,745 visits to the Hostelworld site and app<sup>8</sup>.

And all these new customers helped Hostelworld accelerate as a business, with bookings growth increasing every period since the campaign launched.

<sup>8</sup> Hostelworld internal data



## Conclusion

We are often told that content has to work differently. That the need to engage people must come at the expense of a hard-sell.

This campaign suggests that just isn't true. Our Unexpected Guests content not only engaged young travellers but also communicated hard-sell product proof points that changed their perceptions of hostels, building the Hostelworld brand and accelerating its business.

**Word count: 2000**