



# Company, workforce and clients reap benefits of creative agency's ISO Certifications

CASE STUDY





**Brandfuel is a multi-award-winning international creative agency specialising in the design, planning and delivery of online broadcasts, conferences, exhibitions, events, brand identity and digital services. Founded in 2004, it has offices in London and New York and has over 60 employees. The company works with its clients to enhance their brand reputation and reframe their objectives in an increasingly complex world. It is committed to making sustainability, diversity and inclusion part of everything it does.**

## **WHY DID BRANDFUEL SEEK ISO 45001/45003 CERTIFICATION?**

Brandfuel aims to maintain the highest standards in occupational health & safety and wellbeing to support the needs of its team members, clients and other stakeholders. It was felt that ISO certification would provide an excellent framework to meet these needs.

## **IMPLEMENTING ISO 45001 AND 45003: THE PROCESS**

Ongoing ISO certification plans and progress are discussed at every board and senior management team meeting so that they remain at the top of the company agenda. The board directors, who all appreciate the building of value in the company through the structure's preparation for growth, are enthusiastically involved.

Chief Executive Officer Sue Sawyer, who leads on all ISO standards, recalls: *"When we started the ISO process, staff were wary and a bit nervous but, as time progressed, more people embraced what we were seeking to achieve and have actively sought to become involved."*

Brandfuel was able to complete accreditation relatively quickly because of an existing understanding of the structure and processes, gained through a previous ISO certification. In December 2020, the company had become the first UK agency to be granted ISO 20121 sustainability accreditation for both virtual and physical events.

According to Sawyer: *"The sustainability standard already has a large element of health & safety in it, so much of the work had already been done. Not only that, but as an agency, we have always been very people-centred and we were easily able to demonstrate this."*

She also pays tribute to the pragmatic, thorough and thoughtful approach shown by SGS Lead Auditor Graeme Peacock. *"Graeme was a delight to work with and was flexible and accommodating when changes had to be made in the process. Our audits were actually quite enjoyable and we're looking forward to working with him next year."*

Not unexpectedly, planning audits during the COVID-19 pandemic proved somewhat challenging, with some colleagues unable to attend on the day for operational, logistical or health reasons. While some face-to-face sessions were maintained, they were successfully supplemented by virtual working, a practice that has become more commonplace for SGS.

## HOW THE CERTIFICATIONS HAVE BENEFITED THE BUSINESS

The journey and certification to ISO 45001 and 45003 have proved a substantial and welcome positive addition to the company's culture. According to Sawyer: *"The fact that the board has instigated these initiatives almost gives staff permission and confidence to care about health, safety and mental wellbeing in a way that they might not have felt able to before."* Clear communication of the accreditation has also made existing and new freelance staff and other suppliers aware that Brandfuel has high expectations of behaviour, a reputation that it values, and it will go the extra mile to ensure the wellbeing of people it works with. This is particularly important in a period of growth of the kind that the company is experiencing at the time of writing.

Sawyer fondly recalls initiatives like the 'Kitchen Cuppa' from the first COVID-19 lockdown, but says that ISO certification has driven a more cohesive, planned and structured approach and provided a way to monitor ongoing efforts. This has prompted more staff interest.

Certification also underscores and supports the company's long-standing commitment to continuous improvement. As an example, the structure has enabled informed direction on how best to deploy its six mental health first-aiders and to communicate effectively their role in the business. Another improvement has been the introduction of a Fairness Charter and engagement with staff to vote on three principles they would like to live and work by.

Assessing the risk in areas such as health & safety and psychological wellbeing has also encouraged the company to adopt a similar approach in other areas of operation, assessing these risks with similar rigour. *"Working for our ISO accreditation has created a structure within the company that means that tasks don't fall off the to-do list easily,"* Sawyer observes.

Every ISO standard held is written into staff contracts, requiring a level of commitment appropriate to the employee's role. This helps to keep the company's commitment to its standards highly visible. Sawyer adds: *"Certification gives us confidence, improved communications and the ability to grow. For example, staff have seen how useful it can be when dealing with clients: would you rather answer fifty questions on a client audit questionnaire or simply tick a box to confirm you have the relevant ISO standard? Staff have welcomed the freedom that this brings and the additional time they get back to get on with delivering great work."*

Certification has also had a very positive impact on the perception of Brandfuel among existing and potential clients, who value its emphasis on working to recognised health & safety and mental wellbeing standards. It demonstrates the company's rigour, enhances its reputation and rubber stamps what it says in its pitches and proposals about its commitment. *"This confidence in us may enable us to explore collaborations in different sectors,"* says Sawyer.

Having achieved these most recent ISO certifications, Brandfuel will continue to strive to improve and refine its processes, keeping health & safety and psychological wellbeing at front of mind and prompting initiatives such as the Fairness Charter.

Sawyer is also confident that the focus on continuous improvement will help ensure that the requirements of its three-yearly recertification audits and annual surveillance audits will be met.

## BRANDFUEL ADVICE TO OTHER COMPANIES CONSIDERING CERTIFICATION

Sue Sawyer is eager to offer the benefit of Brandfuel's experience to other organisations contemplating certification to ISO 45001/45003.

Her primary recommendation is to ensure that the process is managed by someone with the authority to galvanise resources and responses, advising: *"You need a top-down approach otherwise it will take too long or not work at all. Having said that, teamwork is essential, but someone near the top still needs to drive. It is a very process-driven task. Once you have set that up, what is required is all spelled out for you ... but you need to understand it and the value it brings to your company to really be able to get the value out of it that it deserves."*

## WHY SGS?

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