

Every journey starts a story



DBA Design Effectiveness Awards
Creative agency: **Stand**
Client: **Caledonian MacBrayne**

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STAND



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every journey starts a story

How we helped CalMac increase island tourism by turning passengers into storytellers.

As the UK's largest ferry operator and essential service for Scotland's Western Isles, Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) asked us to help reposition its brand and grow leisure travel despite declining brand sentiment, media hostility, and a lack of control over fares or routes.

Facing reputational challenges, political scrutiny, and operational limitations, CalMac needed more than a tourism campaign, they needed a brand reset.

Our response was to shift the story from ferries to destinations - from transport service to experience provider. We revitalised the underused strapline "Every journey starts a story" and made it a living platform powered by user-generated content (UGC). Real travellers, their photos, their voices - celebrating authentic island experiences only accessible via CalMac's network.

- **Leisure bookings rose by 7.2%**^[1] (vs. 3% target)
- **Brand reputation jumped 15%**^[2] (vs. 4% target)
- **Brand knowledge rose 19.2%**^[3] (vs. 15% target)



Delivering **over 1,700 pieces of curated content**, an incredible **12:1 return on digital ad spend**,^[5] and **94% video view-through rate**,^[4] we have built a sustainable, ownable brand platform that continues to grow across digital and social channels. This wasn't just a successful campaign - **it reframed public perception**, energised internal teams, and helped secure CalMac's future by proving that design could transform not just how they looked, but how they were seen.

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^[1] During campaign period in year two.

^[2] From 64.9 on the Scottish Brand Reputation Index to a spike of 78.8 during campaign period in year one.

^[3] From 61.7% unprompted recognition to 74% (in Scottish market, during campaign period in year one).

^[4] Reported by Republic of Media in year one. ^[5] Reported by Republic of Media in year two.

CONTEXT & OVERVIEW

The Background

Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) is the West of Scotland's beloved ferry operator – and the largest in the UK – having served the Clyde and Hebrides for over 170 years.

CalMac operates 35 vessels serving more than 50 destinations across 200 miles of Scotland's west coast. 163,000 sailings per year; more than 5 million passenger journeys per year; and 1,600 employees, over 60% of whom are from island communities.

"We are a much bigger ferry operator than people might think. In a good year, we carry almost the population of Scotland."

For mainlanders and tourists from further afield, CalMac are a gateway. They offer exclusive access to the magical landscapes, experiences and stories that only the Isles can provide.

For islanders, they are an absolute necessity. CalMac provides the method and means for daily life, they are the islands' biggest employer, and they help ensure that local businesses can survive and thrive.

"CalMac is more than a company. It's part of island life. Always has been, always will be."

Not all plain sailing

In recent years, reduced public funding, a fixed pricing structure, increased numbers of crossings, Covid pressures, and a fleet long in need of serious investment have all combined to put huge pressure on the ferry service.



Externally, brand sentiment amongst those who use the service most frequently (islanders) was at an all-time low.



Internally, as a result of these varied and prolonged challenges, staff morale had also reached an all-time low.



The team lacked a clear vision forward and every decision was being nervously questioned, deliberated and scrutinised.

However, despite everything, CalMac endures with friendly service and admirable reliability – in some of the most challenging sailing conditions anywhere in the world.

"You look at the stats saying 98.8% of sailings run on time and then you look at the newspaper headline saying 'Ferry chaos' and you think – these things don't match up."

CONTEXT & OVERVIEW



Time to turn the tide

CalMac first approached us in early 2023, with a brief to deliver a refreshed and recharged strategy and positioning for the brand.

Central to this new direction was the Scottish Government's commitment to a £700m investment in the ferry infrastructure over the coming years. Plans were being put in place for the provision of 16 new sustainable vessels, port and facility upgrades, digital service improvements, and the creation of new jobs.

This was the 'new news' that CalMac had been crying out for. Tangible evidence that they are fully invested in and committed to the Isles they serve. And it gave us the license we needed to pivot their brand, with a strategy to shift public focus from the company and the vessels to the destinations they sail to and the experiences available there.

CalMac is leading the world in introducing sustainably-fuelled ferries, with hydrogen, hybrid and electric vessels joining the fleet. But new technology, new boats, and infrastructure upgrades will inevitably bring inconvenience.

And in the meantime, the aging and overcommitted fleet remains vulnerable to breakdowns. We had to prepare island communities for the reality that things may get worse before they get better.

Our strategy for CalMac was simple. Stop talking about the ferries. Start talking about the amazing Scottish islands. Shift from the 'how' of travelling to the 'why'. Recommit to the Isles – to supporting them, investing in their future, and bringing tourists to them.

The Project

Following that overarching brand strategy development, Stand continued to work with CalMac on weaving the strategy across their communications framework, corporate vision, digital migration, onboard retail brands, community partnerships/outreach, and more.

With our new brand strategy now firmly at the heart of their business, then came a nationwide brand-led tourism advertising campaign. From the outset we knew a focus on the Isles had to be front and centre.

Improving revenue and reputation

Aside from their brand challenges, the renewal of the Clyde & Hebrides Ferry Service (CHFS) contract was another clear motivation. To be in the best position to retain that contract (the largest awarded by Transport Scotland) CalMac needed to improve their brand reputation, increase brand knowledge, and increase revenue to reduce reliance on the public purse.

As a public service, CalMac does not control its routes, the number of crossings, nor its fares

The only lever

CalMac can pull to boost revenue is to increase the number of travellers on its ferries. As an essential transport operator, the number of passengers commuting for work, business, school or healthcare will not change. So, to increase passenger numbers significantly, CalMac had to increase demand for leisure travel.

Campaign objectives

We had three clearly defined campaign goals:

- **Increase leisure travel bookings** by at least 3%.
- **Improve brand reputation score** by at least 4%.
- **Increase brand knowledge** by at least 15%.

At the same time, there were areas we felt we could add value:

- Demonstrate CalMac's pride and investment in the isles.
- Showcase island experiences and businesses.
- Improve the brand's relationship with island communities.
- Increase positive sentiment on social media.
- Boost internal brand pride.

CONTEXT & OVERVIEW

Creative approach

These islands are not one thing. They are thousands of individual people, places, and experiences. CalMac support them, invest in them, and celebrate them – exactly what this campaign had to do: Show the Isles at their very best, to entice people to visit for themselves.

Post-covid, there was a will to travel but also nervousness. We had to tip that balance in our favour by demonstrating rich, authentic, accessible experiences. In doing so, we saw opportunity to remind locals just how brilliant their home is; **to see themselves as others see them.**

Design Budget

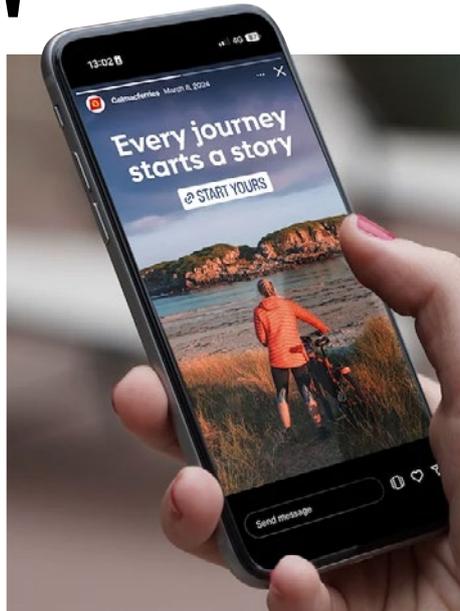
CalMac allocated **£70k** for campaign development of which **£30k** was allocated to design and art direction.

Launch Date

The campaign went live on March 1st, 2024. It launched again for year two on 17th March, 2025.

Media mix

- Nationwide TV and BVOD
- Nationwide radio campaign
- High-impact OOH
- Targeted paid digital & social
- Media partnership with The Times



Design Solution

A previous CalMac campaign, from years prior, had used the strapline 'Every journey starts a story'. Its execution was quite literal – tied to a visual metaphor about a bookshelf. But we saw a line with untapped potential. Because while stories are great, they only come alive when you share them. And the modern way to share stories is not through books, but rather our phone cameras and our social media feeds.

As authentic as it gets

These days, many people want more from their holidays. It's not just about travelling to see a place. It's about learning the culture, trying the food,

meeting the locals, hearing their stories and creating our own. And we use these rich experiences and stories as social currency while we're there, and when we return.

That richness is what CalMac offers. When you board their ferries, you're not chasing the sun or wasting a week on a beach. You're going on an adventure and making memories that will stay with you forever. So we built an entire campaign around people sharing their own authentic island stories.

Capturing our content

To begin the process, we trawled social media for genuine content from people who had visited the Isles before reaching out to these would-be brand ambassadors and requesting use of their material. A meticulous vetting process ensured authenticity and proper rights management for all contributions.

In the final campaign, every single image and every video clip is 100% User Generated Content (UGC). We simply harnessed what already existed and built a platform to showcase those real trips and that genuine holiday magic on a wider scale, and with a CalMac wrapper. And it took off.

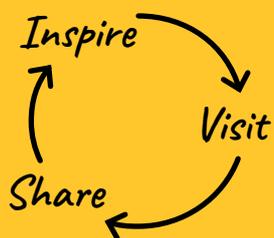


CONTEXT & OVERVIEW



THE POWER OF INSPIRATION

If every journey starts a story, then every story should start someone else's journey. This was our self-propelling brand flywheel, one that increases energy and potential as it spins.



- **Our campaign –**
Every journey starts a story,
- **Becomes a platform –**
for sharing everyone's stories,
- **And those stories –**
inspire new journeys.

The campaign tied in beautifully to the Scots/ Gaelic storytelling tradition. And it provided endless opportunities for campaign extension – supplier stories, crew stories, career stories and so on.

CONTEXT & OVERVIEW

This wasn't about the ferries, but about the Isles. Not the how, but the why. And this campaign pivoted the CalMac brand.

From all about the vessels

To all about the Isles

From transport operator

To experience provider

From traditional OOH ads

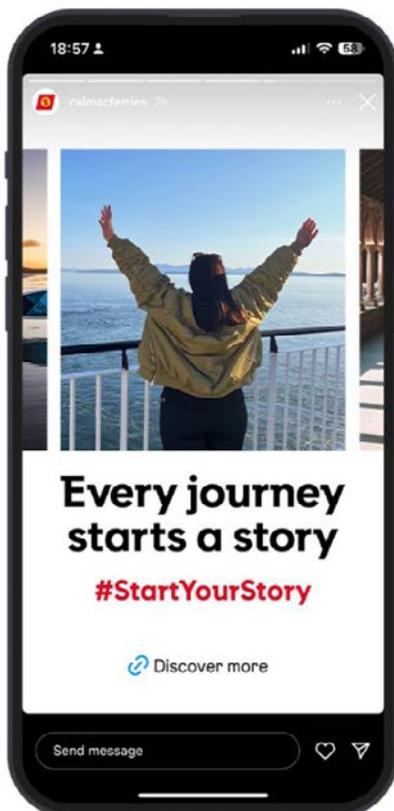
To video-first content

From broadcast

To collaboration

From stock footage

To user-generated content



CONTEXT & OVERVIEW

Our campaign was built to deliver **added value**. Of course it would sell tickets, but it would also help reposition the CalMac brand around the islands.

Demonstrate CalMac's pride and investment in the Isles.

Our campaign is all about the Isles, amazing places that only CalMac gets you to.

Showcase island experiences and businesses. Our campaign acknowledges that the Isles, visitor experiences, and local businesses that are CalMac's 'halo' brand.

Improve the brand's relationship with island communities. We turned CalMac's messaging around from 'we sell ferry tickets' to 'we take you to these amazing islands'.

Increase positive sentiment on social media. Our campaign was a platform for island visitors to share their love for the Isles, and it provided brand-new ways to measure and support that sentiment.

Boost internal brand pride. Our campaign gave employees 'permission' to feel pride in their work. Reminding everybody why they do what they do – to get people to and from amazing places.



Partner-driven campaign extensions

42 key partnerships with island businesses and experiences, promoted through online content and weekly campaign spotlights on owned social media channels.

Island itineraries, published on the web and by email, leverage User Generated Content to tie in with the campaign.

Influencer partnerships and collaborative content surround and extend our campaign with personal stories of island visits.

Products sold on board CalMac vessels are sourced from island businesses wherever possible, evidencing investment in and support of the Isles.

The CalMac marketing team has developed an **'island spotlight'** model for reactive comms that leverages the UGC media library our campaign has built to rapidly highlight specific islands/routes as and when required (i.e. during perceived periods of downturn or to support island events).



RESULTS & OTHER FACTORS

This powerful, positive campaign positioned CalMac as champion of the Isles, and more than met our initial objectives.

- **Leisure bookings**
rose by 7.2%^[1] (vs. 3% target)
- **Brand reputation score**
jumped by 15%^[2] (vs. 4% target)
- **Brand knowledge**
increased by 19.2%^[3] (vs 15% target)

PAID MEDIA: Digital (Meta)

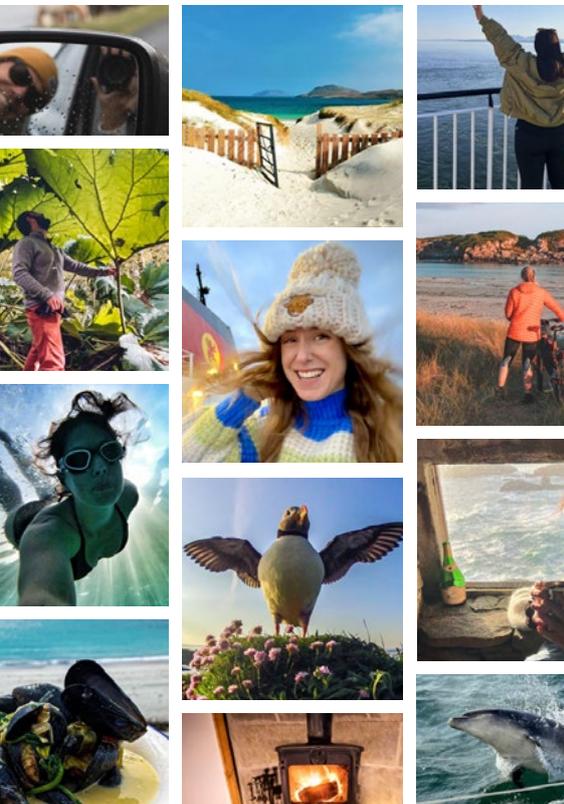
- UGC storytelling delivered an incredible **12.3:1 ROAS**^[5]
- **72,569 clicks** to site, leading to **10,667 purchases**^[5]
- £57k spend on traffic-driving activity^[8] **delivered £596,560 digital purchases**^[5]

PAID MEDIA: Digital (Nano)

- **10.9m impressions**^[5]
- **94% View Through Rate (VTR)**^[4]
- Projected YouTube views **surpassed by 265%**^[5]

PRESS/PR: Times Scotland 'Alba' wraparound cover & DPS

- **14% of Scottish population** recalled this when surveyed^[4]



CREATING ADDED VALUE

We delivered 1,700+ pieces of user-generated content in year one alone, collected and curated into an incredible, authentic, digital library for CalMac to use. Fuel for future campaigns, and extensions of this campaign.

Every content creator, every photographer, every individual who contributed their film and photos becomes a brand ambassador for CalMac. An entire crew of brand advocates, multiplying reach and persuasiveness. Boosting brand sentiment with every proud moment of every photo shared.

And of course, an ongoing marketing platform with longevity and range. Ready to be extended to ports and vessels, enhancing passenger journeys. Ready to be flexed to promote island businesses and increase onboard spend. A campaign platform ideally suited to short-form digital video. Perfectly poised for future development through TikTok, Reels and Stories. And ready to keep content topical and seasonal, lengthening the campaign.

Two years of effectiveness scores are testament to this.

^[1] During campaign period in year two.

^[2] From 64.9 on the Scottish Brand Reputation Index to a spike of 78.8 during campaign period in year one.

^[3] From 61.7% unprompted recognition to 74% (in Scottish market, during campaign period in year one).

^[4] Reported by Republic of Media in year one. ^[5] Reported by Republic of Media in year two.

^[8] Backed up with £6k spend on brand awareness activity.

RESULTS & OTHER FACTORS

30% of Scots and 29% of other UK potentials took action having seen the campaign.^[7]

Leisure bookings rose dramatically year-on-year while the campaign was running.^[1]

	Leisure bookings	Leisure passengers	Leisure spend		Leisure bookings (YOY)	Leisure passengers (YOY)	Value difference (YOY)
Overall Jan–May	261,287	974,512	£15.1m	Campaign not running	-4.3% (-3.6k)	-2.5% (-7k)	2.7% (£100k)
During campaign	186,425	686,504	£9.8m	During campaign	+7.2% (13k)	+8% (51k)	+11.9% (£1m)
% during campaign	71%	70%	65%	Campaign benefit year-on-year	+11.5%	+10.5%	+9.2%

OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

August 2024 saw three of CalMac’s aging major vessels unexpectedly out of service, massively reducing capacity.

Despite these ongoing capacity disruptions bookings still rose **5.8% YOY** in year one and **7.2% YOY** in year two indicating the strength of consumer demand generated by the campaign. And the ability of the campaign to override significant negative press around such disruptions. Which is amazing!

Renewed ambition and pride within CalMac carried through to launching other brand-building media properties alongside the marketing campaign.

As part of the extended, integrated, communications and marketing activity around the *Every Journey Starts a Story* campaign, the **Scottish Island Adventures** podcast was launched, hosted by celebrity islander Coinneach Macleod (the Hebridean Baker).

BBC Scotland produced **Island Crossings** in collaboration with CalMac, an eight-part reality TV series celebrating stories of both the CalMac ferry crews and the islanders who depend on them.

Island Crossings launched in July 2023, broadcast in a late-night slot on BBC Alba. A second season ran July–August 2024. Both are available on the iPlayer.

^[1] Reported by Caledonian MacBrayne, during campaign period in year two.

^[7] Reported by Republic of Media in year two. Most common actions were visiting the CalMac website, talking to others about CalMac, and booking a trip.

CREDITS

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