

BRANDING

YOUR CREATIVE BUSINESS

EFFECTIVE SELF-PROMOTION IN THE WINDY CITY

Words: Kay Daly Design: Joann Schommer

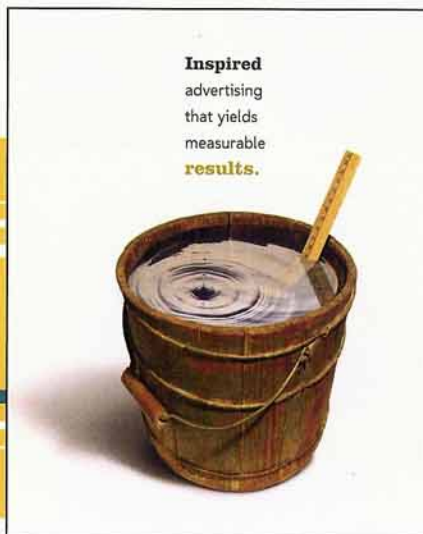
Creative professionals are the great communicators. We find ways, in words and images, to speak for our clients, encapsulating in few masterful strokes a company's mission or a product's virtues. Yet when it comes to working that same magic for ourselves, we often stall.

"It's like the cobbler's kids," says Maureen Glasoe of The Glasoe Group. "It took us over a year to get around to creating a business card and letterhead.



Your brand is your professional personality, a calling card that demonstrates what you can do for your clients. And while there are as many ways to make that first impression, an effective brand requires careful thought and planning.

Sometimes that means a group effort. When Sharon Elliott, Shelley Timm-Thompson, and Kathy Evans Wisner first came together, they employed traditional



Images courtesy of Raindance Advertising

Your own stuff gets pushed to the back burner, either because all your creative energy gets used up for your clients' work, or because you cast a more critical eye on your own materials."

But self-promotion is crucial for any business. As professionals who make a living making an impression, it's especially important to be able to "walk the walk" when we "talk the talk" to prospective clients. And that effort starts with branding.

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methods from their combined 63 years of experience in advertising to create their brand. They compiled a list of their strengths, brainstormed separately, and then worked with a trademark lawyer to identify a unique name that would convey their company's personality: funny, warm, but serious about business.

With their company name, Raindance, and their tagline, "drenched in creativity," they are able to spin out a seemingly endless series of brand tie-ins to keep them at the

top of their clients' minds. When meeting new prospects, the women hand out green umbrellas emblazoned with their logo, and give out barometers as gifts to existing clients. The heading "Today's Forecast" tops their business stationery, providing yet another clever tie-in as well as an opportunity to personalize the message ("Sunny, if we work with you!").



combined capabilities, they chose the tagline "The Power of Two." Their logo encapsulates the message in a bold, but simple image: "g" squared.

Like the Glasoes, designer Sharon Bending incorporates her name into her company brand. She relies on the pun of her name to connote her chief professional asset, her flexibility as a designer, and she underscores the idea with her logo: a "B" folding down into a



Samples courtesy of The Glasoe Group

The husband-and-wife team of Ted and Maureen Glasoe went through a similar brainstorming process when developing a brand to communicate their dual skills in design and editorial. They rejected an early idea, "Glasoe Design," in favor of a name that would better convey the comprehensive nature of their services: "The Glasoe Group." To underscore their



letter "D" for "Bending Design." She carries the idea of flexibility over to her company brochure, a multi-purpose piece that doubles as a collection of removable service-specific business cards. Bending uses Flash animation to project the same theme on her Web site. As the page loads, the letters of her tagline "flexible graphic solutions" swirl onto the screen, bending and stretching into shape.

Image courtesy of Bending Design

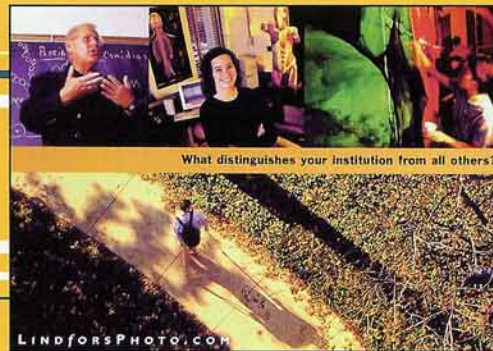
While Bending's brand incorporates her name, Sharon avoids projecting her individual personality in her brand, instead crafting a more business-like presentation. "I'm a one-person shop, so if I took a more whimsical approach, I might not be taken seriously."

The Glasoes employ a similar strategy. "We prefer a clean, industrial style," says Maureen Glasoe. "It reflects how we approach our business and the clients we tend to attract."



theme reflects her organic work style and serves as homage to one of her early pieces, an interactive software program that teaches kids about plants. On the site, the cartoon Hadad waters the garden's "flowers," and they sprout into vines that provide a navigational menu.

The personal approach also works well for photographer Tom Lindfors. Lindfors' online portfolio projects a highly personal brand choice, an American Indian theme. A portrait of a tribe member dominates the



Images courtesy of Lindfors Photography

But other creative professionals take the opposite tack, choosing to inject a bit of their own personalities. Artist and education software designer Roxana Hadad prefers this strategy. Hadad's online portfolio is playful and childlike, a style that reflects her work, but she didn't initially plan to go in that direction. "I researched a lot of designers' sites, and originally tried a drier approach, but it made me uncomfortable," she recalls.

In the end, Hadad literally put herself on her Web site in a cartoon self-portrait. A garden



Image courtesy of Roxana Hadad

homepage and Native American symbols provide a navigational menu. The look of the site references one of Lindfors' early exhibits, a collection of American Indian images with which he first made his name as a photographer. The look has become his personal calling card, carrying over into his business cards and stationery.

Lindfors extends this approach by using personal projects to build his brand, as in a recent exhibit of firefighter portraits. After photographing members of a local firehouse, he located the perfect exhibition

venue, a neighborhood bank that was interested in building a connection with the community. While Lindfors says he would have pursued the exhibit for his own satisfaction, the project offers professional benefits, providing yet another way to gain exposure. He also uses images from the exhibit to create a signature look for his marketing materials.

But while brand development provides an opportunity to create an impression, it's only the first step.



Their logo sets the tone for the Z Factory brand. A white "Z" on a red circle sits beside a sideways "F." Puffy smoke clouds emit from the cross bars of the "F," a fun representation of the "factory" itself. The site's "company history" projects the same brand message as the partners dub themselves "The Starsky and Hutch of promotions. The Donnie and Marie of branding."

Offline, the Z Factory duo looks for ways to convey this spirit in

Samples courtesy of Z Factory

Successful self-promoters constantly pursue the marketing process, from converting leads to deepening relationships with existing clients.

For Cary Zartman and Faron Greenfield of Z Factory that means devising highly original marketing activities injected with a heavy dose of off-kilter whimsy. "Humor is what we respond to," Greenfield explains. "This is who we are; we don't want clients who won't respond to that."



traditional marketing pieces. After joining the Lakeview Chamber of Commerce, they sent a postcard introducing themselves to the membership. But to ensure their piece didn't get lost in the shuffle, they printed it in bright yellow on thick foam core. The result was a message that got a laugh and got filed away for future reference.

Z Factory also invests in creative pieces and off-the-wall campaigns to keep their name circulating. Each

year, they host a branded holiday party for friends and clients and design holiday cards and gifts, including custom-made "Honest Gift Labels" and a "Winter Survival Kit." Like their foam core postcard, the holiday offerings are designed to stand out from the pack, and create a buzz far beyond the cold winter months.

Holiday humor is also a marketing mainstay for another Chicago design shop, gripdesign. Each year, grip principals Kevin McConkey and Kelly Kaminski let their designers loose on the in-house project of creating a memorable holiday card.

As with Z Factory, grip's principals have found the cards make for a great goodwill offering that resonates

far beyond the holiday season. Clients look forward to seeing what grip has come up with each year, and the cards tend to find a home pinned up in cubicles all year round. A recent favorite was a card designed to look as if it had been lost in the mail for years. The front shows a "family portrait" of the staff, dressed in retro attire, with a greeting from "The Grips." The message inside wishes "all the best for 1982."

But while McConkey is proud of his company's holiday pieces and marketing materials, he's quick to note that fun pieces

aren't the heart of self-promotion. "A lot of things that people call marketing are just shiny lures," he says. Effective self-promotion, he explains, is more about the relationships you build, so he focuses on networking by attending meetings and sponsoring events where he'll meet decision makers.

Z Factory and Bending Design pursue similar connections through their local chambers of commerce. Like Zartman and Greenfield, Bending made an effort to introduce herself when she joined the Hoffman Estates Chamber of Commerce by writing an article for the organization's newsletter and sending mailings to the membership. Success, she says, is "not just the pieces you create; it's the people who know you."



Image courtesy of Z Factory

But the strongest means of self-promotion, McConkey says, is the "personal network of trust" you build by doing the best work for your clients. No project is too small or unimportant, he explains. "With every job you create customer evangelists. It's with your best work - both in terms of your product and your customer service - that you gain the best marketing. By making good on the promise of quality work, you're guaranteed to build brand buzz that will keep you in business for years to come."

About the writer:

Kay Daly is a freelance writer/editor who now realizes she has a lot of work to do on her brand. She has served as managing editor for "America Online's Local City Guide" and manager of editor services for FastWeb.com. As a freelancer, she specializes in Web writing, and has worked with industry leaders including Starwood Hotels, Diageo, Crown Royal, and BMG. She's also written articles on a range of topics including local dining, career planning, and arts/leisure. Her work has appeared in *TimeOut Chicago*, *The Chicago Sun-Times Red Streak*, *Chicago Social*, and *Dramatics Magazine*. Her work is available online at www.waylaid.com.



Samples courtesy of gripdesign



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About the designer:

Joann Schommer is a freelance graphic designer currently working on her own brand. Her background experience in photography and digital imagery has given her opportunities to work for companies such as Getty Images and the Art Institute of Chicago. Today, she is a photo services coordinator for Playboy Enterprises, Inc. in Chicago. Her Web site is currently under construction, but she is available via e-mail at litecatcher@yahoo.com.

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