

THE COLUMBIA BUSINESS MONTHLY

VOL. 2 NO. 5

The Monthly Newspaper of Howard County and Columbia, MD

June 1994

Marketing Your Business

Even if you are saving money, what about your image?

Carolyn West Price

The do-it-yourself mentality prevails. At Hechingers or Home Depot, they're obvious. You know, they're the Harry and Harriett Homeowner-type who stack their carts with everything from plywood and studs to landscaping stones and light fixtures.

In the business world, however, the do-it-yourselfers aren't so obvious. Or are they? The suit-and-ties don't migrate en masse to the local computer store in the same obvious fashion as the Harrys and Harrietts participate in the Saturday-morning-hardware-store ritual. Instead, they sit locked in an office, pecking away at a computer keyboard maneuvering through a desktop publishing program and fancying themselves as the new graphic artist who can potentially save the company lots of money.

But what ever happened to specialization? Or how about a concern for your image, so you don't look like you've whipped it up in-house to cut corners?

In the advent of "techno-lust" as one client put it, many businesspeople are designing their own ads, publishing their own newsletters, creating their own fliers and invitations...and the list goes on. While I'm all for saving money, compromising your image for the sake of saving a few dollars is not worth it. That is, of course, if you really are saving money by the time you or someone in your office learns the software, let alone takes classes in graphic design and advertising theory.

Sure, there are many pieces that can be well done with today's desktop publishing software. Think about those good looking memos, fax cover sheets, slide masters, reports, and low-key fliers. But the pieces that really represent your company in the eyes of recipients--your stationery, a newsletter, and your company's brochure --should be investments.

Take the time to research a marketing company or graphic artist whose philosophy is compatible with yours, whose portfolio of samples reflects the quality and creativity that you feel will project your company's image well (or at least is appropriate for the particular piece that is imminent), and who can work within

your budget--assuming it's realistic. Ask several companies for quotes on their services; pick one, and work with that company to develop consistency in your image.

The same applies to your print advertising. So many small businesses either set their own ads or take the newspaper up on its offer to set their ad for free. Remember, there's something to be said for the old adage, "You get what you pay for." No, I'm not criticizing the papers because I applaud them for providing such a service to clients. But what I am saying is that any graphics person has a certain style. So if the paper's graphics person is setting your ad, along with many others, it is not surprising that your ad doesn't look dramatically different than the other ads and probably doesn't "pop" off the page. Unlike an artist you hire, the paper's graphics person has no vested interest in making your business look any better or worse than any other advertiser. It's a convenience; it's that simple. So, spend the \$100-200 or so and have an ad that looks good--maybe not Addy award-winning, but good. (FYI--an average desktop publishing graphics artist --not an artist-artist--charges between \$60 and 80 per hour, and will provide project quotes willingly).

And, finally, when it comes to printing--whether it's business cards, a company brochure, or flyers--pick a quantity large enough to give you a price break (understanding that the smaller the quantity, the higher the unit cost), and compare the costs of traditional printers with those quick copy places that often build their businesses on convenience rather than quality or price. Also know that the prices of paper vary tremendously, so take the time to work with a good rep and resist the temptation to request name brands in lieu of "or comparable" when requesting quotes.

While much of this column has focused on the "look" of your printed pieces, and the risk of functioning too much in the do-it-yourself mode, the same warnings go for the content. How often have you received a letter or brochure from a company and really wondered what they were



trying to say? Or, did they know how to proofread? Or, it read fine but just didn't have any pizzazz? Freelance writers and marketing companies are readily available to assist with the editing or writing process. They understand the power of our language and how to use it to your advantage.

Remember, a jack-of-all-trades is a master of none. So if you're an expert at what you do, why not leave your image in the hands of those who can position you in the best light as efficiently and effectively as possible, and resist the urge to believe you're saving money wisely when you want to "play on that computer" (as another client put it) and do it all yourself?

The bottomline is, if writing, marketing, and design aren't your areas of expertise, the "do-it-yourselfer" runs the risk of giving a mixed message to the rest of the world. That is, you want to say you're "a top notch company committed to quality," and that your clients are important. If, however, the printed pieces that represent you are hard to read, user unfriendly, and look cheap (as if your clients weren't worth it) what message are you really conveying? With survival in business as challenging as it is, can you really afford to lose money by "saving" money on cutting corners that shouldn't be cut?

Carolyn West Price is president of IMPACT Marketing & Public Relations, Inc. in Ellicott City. She is an adjunct professor at Loyola College and was recently recognized by the Small Business Administration as the Small Business Trainer/Education Advocate of the Year. She can be reached at (410) 461-9398.