

Brave New World

By Les Lovoy

TV or not TV? That may not be the question, but it has given certain areas of business, which traditionally have not embraced marketing and advertising, reason for pause.

In these days of economic uncertainty, businesses such as law, architecture, engineering, accounting and interior design, etc. are beginning to rethink their age-old philosophy that promotion is a four-letter word.

“Marketing for these types of businesses is no longer an option or a luxury—it is a necessity,” says Jacqueline L. Franklin, owner of CALEB Corporate Marketing Solutions, and president of the Alabama Chapter of the Society of Marketing Professional Services (SMPS). “Our organization is primarily comprised of engineering firms, architecture firms and other design associated firms,” Ms. Franklin explained. “They are quickly realizing that without an effective, comprehensive marketing and advertising plan, they will either go out of business, or at least struggle unnecessarily in today’s economy.”

According to Ms. Franklin, the SMPS’s sole purpose is to help its members really embrace marketing. The association’s mission statement makes that loud and clear. It says that its goal is for SMPS “to be the premier resource for education, information and resources in marketing professional services for the built and natural environment.” To meet this goal, the SMPS holds monthly meetings where industry professionals discuss pertinent business topics. It also sponsors seminars to help career marketers earn continuing education units, and it acts as a clearinghouse for information, which is shared by peers.

“Firms have to make an investment in marketing to know how to package, present and sell their service, Ms. Franklin said with the fervor of someone preaching the gospel. “Good firms know that their long-term success revolves around creating a client conscious environment.”

She said that historically, some engineering firms gravitated toward a traditional way of doing things. In other words, what’s worked in the past shouldn’t be changed or altered. She notes, however, that reality has a way of awakening leadership to the necessity of embracing change.

To offer SMPS members encouragement, the organization has been sponsoring a marketing and advertising competition for a number of years. Barri Murse of the KPS Group, and chairperson of this year’s awards competition, says that she has seen an increase in quality of pieces being submitted.

“In my industry, most marketing budgets are based on percentage of gross revenue,” she explained. “Consequently, the quality of the pieces reflect the state of the economy; but overall, they do show that member firms are becoming much more marketing savvy.”

“Even the most traditional-minded executive can see that the business climate has changed and that new and innovative thought is needed to survive,” Ms. Franklin adds. “Once they see that, they are much more open to the fact that there is no substitute for the contribution of an experienced marketer in making a successful business plan a reality.”

Ruwena Healy, Director of Marketing and Client Relations for Dixon Odom PLLC, a Birmingham CPA firm, echoes that sentiment. Ms. Healy also serves as the chairperson of the Birmingham Group of the Southeast Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA). According to Ms. Healy, some time ago, the LMA invited other areas of businesses that are not traditional advertisers/marketers into their fold.

Ms. Healy feels strongly that in order for established businesses to have an effective marketing plan there are several pre-requisites. At least two of these pertain to the level of expertise one’s marketing director/coordinator has reached, and the perception of that person within the company’s top management.

“The person hired to direct or coordinate the marketing efforts should be a true marketing professional. Marketing, done correctly, is a craft and a talent,” she explains. “The second pre-requisite is that the marketing person should be a part of the upper management inner circle. They should be privy to the firm’s business strategy, and should be respected enough for fellow upper management associates to respect their opinion.”

And, finally, Ms. Healy says that unless the marketing person has someone in the firm’s top leadership who is championing the marketing and advertising cause and effort, it generally cannot be done, or done right.

One challenge for marketers of these service-based organizations is that they do not consider themselves or the services they provide on the same level with products sold through traditional means of advertising—and rightfully so. However, Ms. Healy explains that there are still consistencies that are common to every aspect of business.

“You still need a strategy, effective planning, a realistic budget and, as I mentioned before, a healthy respect for the art and craft of marketing and advertising,” she said with conviction. “And, yes there are still pockets of resistance out there. But, if a company would take the quantum leap and do it right and build a mechanism to track the results, they would see how successful it could be to help them reach their goals.”

And, in this day and time, there are plenty of companies and business entities that are willing to hold a firm’s hand and lead them down the marketing path. As a member of LMA, a firm is privy to a wealth of information that has been gathered over the last few years about what works and what doesn’t work for law firms.

Even though most of it is entirely new to attorneys, for the most part, it is standard for businesses that advertise, especially if they cannot allocate a large amount of their annual budget for advertising.

For example, the LMA suggests these elements in every firm's marketing plan: build your referral sources and network, develop your niche, get on the lecture circuit, write articles, invest in good marketing materials, establish an effective web site, develop an e-mail mailing list, and stay in contact with past, present and potential customers. These are simple things, but they are things that may not readily come to mind.

Linda Wilkins Frazier, ASID, IIDA, president of LW Frazier Group and the Birmingham area director for the Alabama chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers, said that the LMA's suggestions for attorneys should be taken to heart by local interior designers.

"To that, I would add, create relationships with market-targeted organizations, and I don't mean just attend meetings," she explained. "Get involved. Join a committee. Sitting in a room as one of 100 people listening to a speaker isn't effective. To get noticed, contribute to the organization by working on a committee with five or six people. Volunteer for a charity. Sure, our society is in a time famine. The last thing on your list may be spending more time out of your comfort zone volunteering. But, you simply will not survive without doing something. And, that something is building solid relationships."

When asked why designers are so hesitant to sell or market themselves, Ms. Frazier sits back in her chair, thinks for a second, leans forward and measures her words. "For the most part, designers are not familiar with marketing techniques," she says. "They certainly know it's out there, but they taught precious little about it in school. So, they are very hesitant to stick their toe in those waters. As a result, when they graduate and begin designing, few know how to market themselves, let alone how to market a company."

To help their members become more comfortable with marketing, the national ASID organization is doing its share to dispel the notion that marketing has no place in interior design. Along with brochures, national design competitions, and ads in major business shelter publications, ASID provides a national referral system. Anyone can call their toll free number or visit their web site and fill out an information page. The organization funnels the client name to a local designer, who takes it from there.

"The state chapter of ASID is taking this valuable service a step further," Ms. Frazier said. By updating our web site to include photographs of interior designers' work, we are creating an extremely useful marketing tool. Potential clients can review an interior designer's credentials and see examples of their work."

Ms. Frazier noted, that as in all forms of service-oriented businesses, interior designers must look at each person in their firm as a potential marketer. "Everyone has family, friends, neighbors and co-workers," she explained. "All of them are potential clients. It's just a matter of training everyone to see new business opportunities."

She also stressed the importance of treating everyone, not just as a potential client, but also with respect. "I ran into an office runner who was having a terrible day," she said. "While chatting, she mentioned her uncle; he was the decision-maker for a major corporation's design project I wanted. Unbeknownst to me, she told him about my taking

time to help and encourage her. When we met, he said, 'All three designers short listed for this project are excellent, but I know you would take good care of it.' Walking away with the contract, I again was reminded of the importance of building relationships in marketing."