Tons of self-promotions cross clients' desks every year. How can you guarantee that yours will be the chosen one? We asked six top clients and eight successful designers to share their insight into what gives a promo saving grace. by Claire Sykes
They arrive in envelopes, boxes, tubes and trucks. Every day, letters and portfolios, postcards and posters, gifts and gimmicks pile up in the offices of marketing managers and creative directors, screaming to be heard above the din of cluttered desks and over-scheduled Day-Timers. Will your self-promotions be noticed or ignored?

The only way to gauge whether your promotions are hits or misses is to find out what your clients really think of them; their perceptions may vary greatly from yours. You may love demonstrating your "cool" designs by having an ice-cream truck deliver Popsicles with your portfolio, but your clients may feel an annoying chill. You may think you impress with your persistence by sending postcards every month ("Collect all 12!"), but recipients may think you're a pest.

You can ensure successful self-promos by researching your clients' needs, sending pieces that reflect those needs plus your firm's philosophy and style, and following up afterward. Whether it's a portfolio or a postcard, a bottle of wine or a blank book, even the most impressive self-promo might not directly get you the gig, but it could get you in the door.

Illustration by Chris Sickels
THE TRUTH ABOUT PROMOS
Marketing executives typically receive dozens of self-promos a day. “Most go in the trash,” says Jaleh Bisharat, vice president of marketing at Amazon.com in Seattle. “I’ve never responded to a cold-call self-promo. I’ve always had so many design contacts already that I can narrow my decision to several good ones. What matters is their ongoing work, and how they help sell an idea through the organization and how they manage the process with many constituents.”

In fact, it was a relationship, not a single self-promo piece, that led Amazon to retain San Francisco design firm Turner Duckworth. Bisharat had worked with Turner Duckworth in a previous job. According to principal David Turner, a client’s hiring decision rarely hinges solely on a splashy print brochure. “Businesses hire you based on your work, not your self-promo—unless they need someone to design a self-promo,” Turner says. “View your self-promo as a vehicle to propel your designs. Show your work as your hero. Let it speak for itself.”

Often it comes down to timing. Take the toy truck Bisharat received the same day a real one, painted with Amazon’s logo, pulled up outside her window. “If we were in the market for painted trucks, we would’ve followed up,” she says. “There’s a huge gap sometimes between what intrigues you, personally, and what you’d actually use for your company.”

Your self-promo should express your firm’s design approach and what you believe your clients will best respond to. There are four basic types: presentations, third-party endorsements, correspondence and gifts. Here’s what successful designers and their clients have to say about them.

PRESENTATIONS
Self-promos that showcase your work and describe the design strategy, objectives and results offer recipients the most useful information, says Gwilym McGrew, senior vice president of retail business development at Warner Bros. Consumer Products in Burbank, CA. That’s the kind of self-promo he received from Maureen Smullen, president of Smullen Design Inc. in Pasadena, CA. McGrew admired the work Smullen had done for another division of Warner Bros. Smullen Design’s classy, olive-green, spiral-bound portfolio sealed the deal and prompted McGrew to hire the firm.

The promo that’s only a promo “has no restrictions and doesn’t reveal the thought process that went into it,” says Cameron Woo, publisher and creative director of The Bark, a Berkeley, CA-based literary-arts quarterly for dog lovers. “I need to see work that has a real client attached to it,” he says.

Woo was immediately struck by the small, gate-fold folder with four postcards of award-winning book-cover designs created by Red Canoe in Deer Lodge, TN. Red Canoe principal Deb Koch mailed it to Woo after seeing a copy of The Bark.

“We don’t do silly and cute promos for new prospects,” says Red Canoe’s Deb Koch. The firm sent a toy car, complete with trailer and red canoe, to existing clients to explain that staffers would be away from the office at the HOW Design Conference. The “silly” promo, however, scored several assignments.
“It captures what they’re about,” Woo says. “It’s not over-designed. The text is thought-out and well-written, with an almost poetic interaction between the type and words. It has a very literary feel to it.”

Red Canoe followed up this piece with wire-bound customized booklets of its print and Web designs, including case studies, a company history, executive profiles and an awards list. Woo hired the firm to design The Bark’s Web site (www.thebark.com).

Cheryl Zahniser, brand creative director for Nordstrom in Seattle, agrees that the most effective self-promos show design work in context. A Mylar-covered portfolio Zahniser received from Seattle-based Smolhaus Design + Associates made all the right moves. “It included strategically and intellectually creative designs, relevant to our needs, and demonstrated the thought process behind them, vs. design for design’s sake,” Zahniser says.

Zahniser also thinks a self-promo piece should provide a description of the design firm’s partnership with a client and how they solved the creative problem. That’s what The Leonardt Group of Seattle sent her, in the form of 11x17in. case-study sheets enclosed in a simple black envelope. “We want to work with people who can understand the emotional aspect that a company is trying to convey,” Zahniser says. “Packets of information about the designers, with a newsletter, client list and principal bios, help—but only if they accompany examples of their work.”

The case-study approach has also paid off for Worthington, OH-based design firm Fitch. Van Smick, Nortel Networks’ vice president of global brand management, hired Fitch to create Nortel’s new identity system after receiving the firm’s perfect-bound, 45-page collection of project photographs with case studies. Fitch also sends clients point-of-view pieces with suggestions about how to think creatively.

And don’t forget that CD-ROMs and Web sites are important for self-promotion. “A digital portfolio is crucial,” says Ilise Benun, director of Creative Marketing & Management, a consulting firm in Hoboken, NJ. “People in a hurry want to see your work at any time, right away.” Digital presentations also increase your exposure and show you’re on top of technology.

Like Turner Duckworth, Smullen Design believes the best promos showcase a firm’s work and describe the strategies behind the designs. Smullen’s classy portfolio helped seal a deal with Warner Bros. Consumer Products.
CORRESPONDENCE

It could be as simple as a postcard announcing the latest design award. But keep in mind that some clients, like Warner Bros. McGrew, don’t like them. “Postcards don’t show, they just tell,” he says. So he chuckles them.

“Frequently mailed postcards say, ‘Don’t forget, I’m here,’” The Bark’s Woo says. “But they usually don’t have enough aesthetic value for me to save them. Anyway, I know I’ll always receive another one.” Personal letters do work for him, however, if they refer to his magazine, an illustrator featured in it or a specific reason for the connection the person wants to make with him.

Thumbnail Creative Group of Vancouver, BC, sends a brief, informative letter to prospects who presumably have never heard of the firm. According to principal Rik Klingel, 30–50% ask for more information, a high response rate that Klingel attributes to both the letter’s content and a unique stationery system (with its provocative vellum envelope, unusual finishing details and embossed words that express the firm’s philosophy).

“In our initial letter,” Klingel says, “without mentioning any client names, we list three successful categories we’ve worked in and the amazing results we produced. Then we follow up a week later.”

Amazon’s Bisharat suggests using bullet points in letters, for quick and easy reading. “Typically, marketing people rely on headlines to synthesize information very fast,” she says.

Personalized email may be quicker (and less formal), but as a first-contact self-promo, it can turn off some recipients. Not Nortel’s Smick. He prefers email, especially if it’s jazzed up with color graphics. What about mass emails? “They’re not very effective, particularly if I don’t recognize the sender,” Kangas says. “If I do, or if the subject header interests me, I’ll open them.”

The trend toward one-to-one marketing has rendered mass mailing virtually ineffective. “Better to send something unique and fabulous to 100 carefully selected prospects than to send a generic mailing to 1,000 unqualified potential customers,” Benne says.

THIRD-PARTY ENDORSEMENTS

“Along with our work, the most effective selling tool is the stories that surround it,” says Ted Leonhardt, principal of The Leonhardt Group. “We let our audience decide if our designs are as smart as we think they are.”

Magazine coverage and award announcements impress both existing clients and prospects. Just be sure to include a cover letter that summarizes the article and expresses how it relates to your client and the work you produce. “They cut right through the self-generated hyperbole,” Nortel’s Smick says.

When you score press coverage for a particular client project, share the glory with that client. David Salanitro, principal and creative director of San Francisco firm Oh Boy, A Design Company, played that card when he sent his client at Charles Schwab a favorable clipping. Jackie Kangas, senior creative services manager at Schwab, admired Oh Boy even more after she received a Korean design magazine featuring work the firm had done for her company. “It’s nice to see they’re well-respected in the graphic-design and hi-tech industries,” she says. “It lends them credibility.”

Smathaus Design’s collateral includes a boxed book and postcards of work samples. The book utilizes unusual printing techniques and strives to promote an understanding of creativity.
GIFTS

Some gifts are welcomed, others are waved off as gimmicks. “Unless they’re stunning, we throw posters away or hang them in the storage room,” Woo says, noting that he doesn’t need any more T-shirts, mugs or pens, either. “After a point, you stop noticing the logo on them and just see them as junk or functional items.”

If you choose to send a gift, make it unique and useful. For example, Oh Boy’s blank planners and ironic holiday gift wrap inspired Kangas to invite principal David Salanitro to visit with his portfolio. Recognize, though, that such tokens of appreciation work best with existing clients or serious prospects. “Don’t send Christmas gifts if there’s no business relationship,” says McGrew, citing a cheesecake he receives each year from a California designer he barely remembers. “These and other gimmicks don’t generate business because they don’t tell us what a designer can do.”

Feeble attempts at humor only compel Kangas to throw out or give away that lottery ticket, box of crayons with the catchy phrase or crisp one-dollar bill. “Sending them is a tremendous waste of money and materials,” she says. Nordstrom’s Zahniser adds, “I’d rather see the work.”

Useful gifts can make killer self-promotions. Oh Boy, A Design Company’s gift wrap and blank books are a hit with clients, old and new. These gifts may not directly win assignments, but they often lead to portfolio visits that land new clients or build goodwill with existing ones.
8 TIPS AND TRICKS FROM THE SELF-PROMO PROS

Effective self-promos require thought and planning. Before you sketch out your design ideas:

1. Know your purpose. What do you want your self-promo to accomplish? Do you want to be remembered? Do you want to educate clients about design’s strategic benefits? Four years ago, Thumbnail Creative Group wanted to break into packaging design, so the firm created a holiday gift candle to show off related capabilities. Now packaging accounts for nearly 30% of the firm’s business.

2. Research your market. Explore the companies on your mailing list so you can refer to their design sensibilities and needs. “Smart designers poke around the company through other people, usually friends,” Amazon.com’s Jaleh Bisharat says. “Find out the top-two issues and challenges the company faces. Seek out projects other designers have produced for them, so you know what has worked and what hasn’t.”

3. Be relevant. While highlighting your design capabilities, your self-promo should resemble something your client might use or buy. “The Leonhardt Group produces diverse work, but their self-promos for us are tailored to the fashion and retail industries, since that’s what we’re interested in,” says Nordstrom’s Cheryl Zahniser.

4. Plan a campaign. The best self-promos complement your PR, advertising and sales efforts. “Ultimately, each piece should build a cohesive, identifiable whole,” says Red Canoe’s Deb Koch.

You spend time and money creating your self-promos. Make them count when you:

5. Express yourself. You’ve got a style; flaunt it. Appetite Engineers of San Francisco sent The Bark and other potential clients a sheet of perforated stamps featuring the firm’s creations, and a handmade, perfect-bound book to put them in. “The book’s pell-mell design and scattered, offbeat phrases (“You wagged little man.” “Ambition is no sin”) disorient some recipients, but principal Martin Venezky would rather not compromise his artistic integrity for the sake of convention.

6. Attend to details. You do it for your clients, why not for yourself? Find out the name of that marketing director and spell it right, proofread your words and double check visual placement. “If you’re sloppy with small things, how can I be sure you won’t be elsewhere?” asks Bisharat.

Even an award-winning self-promo is useless unless you send it to the right people at the right time. Make sure you:

7. Keep ’em coming. Send a series of self-promos, regularly, based on your clients’ preferences. To find out what those are, simply ask clients how often they’d like to hear from you. Generally, December is already crowded with mailings, so The Bark’s Cameron Woo suggests waiting until February. “Bulk mailings are good once a quarter, and project examples up to twice a year,” he says.

8. Follow up. “If you don’t follow up, all your self-promo efforts could slam to a halt,” says Maureen Smullen of Smullen Design. Initiate a dialogue with clients by making phone calls a week or two after your mailing, especially if a client requests it. Of course, don’t waste your time dialing hundreds of phone numbers, but know that it’s worth the effort for smaller mailings.
MOOTH: Illustrators are all about self-promotion, but often it all feels the same. Joel Nakamura’s promo stands out among the postcards, sourcebook ads and generic mailers.

HAWK: Joel’s self-promotion piece is unique. It’s a very creative way to view his work, and something that an art director would hold on to.

LANE: The slide-viewer promo stood out from the other illustrators’ entries. It has a classy look. It doesn’t take up much space, but it shows a nice variety of work.
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