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Prized Strategies

Award-winning remodeling companies differentiate themselves from the competition with creative approaches to marketing

Dave Wolkowitz
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Professional Remodeler

Creative, strategic marketing can help a remodeler break through the information clutter that homeowners often face. It can also help avoid the trap of price competition and eroding profits by deterring homeowners from choosing the low bid on their projects.

Because good marketing is essential to a successful business, Professional Remodeler launched the Pinnacle Marketing Awards competition to recognize marketing efforts that can serve as examples to the industry. A panel of judges scored each Pinnacle entry according to its creativity, originality, design quality, text quality, appropriateness to target audience, appropriateness to medium, and reinforcement of the brand.

Guiding the judges was the knowledge that remodeling is a very personal, complicated process that can create anxiety for homeowners. That's why homeowners need to believe they can trust the company with which they choose to work.

"Homeowners want to have comfort that things aren't going to get ruined or taken or anything else," judge Karla Kregel said. "They don't want to call up and have just any guy with hammers and nails into their homes."

By using marketing techniques to help communicate their company's personal-ity, remodelers can help homeowners take the first step in contacting them about a project. Judge Mike Nagel said marketing is crucial for creating client chemistry.

Client Newsletter: The newsletter with teeth

The closest most remodelers want to get to row upon row of sharp teeth is the collection of saws in the back of their trucks. That's not the case with RLS Construction Inc. of Atlanta: It prefers 45-pound barracuda.

One look at the cover of the winter 2000 edition of RLS' Building Buzz newsletter tells potential clients that RLS is different. The cover shot is a picture of an RLS employee with the barracuda she caught during the company's annual fishing trip. To the right of that is an "Employee Spotlight" article profiling a project manager. The four-page newsletter is equally split between employee news and coverage of the 2000 Chrysalis Award that RLS won.

Some of the judges initially thought RLS' newsletter focused too much on RLS and not enough on what the company can do for clients. But the tide quickly turned as the panel realized that RLS' newsletter could be useful bait for hooking new projects.

Nagel was particularly adamant about Building Buzz because he thought potential clients would realize that RLS' good chemistry outside work signals good chemistry on the job. "I don't think people want to see tips on how to keep their sink smelling clean or how to stop paint from peeling," Nagel said. "They want to see how the team works, and before and after shots. RLS had both."

Advertisement: The Leatherman tool of advertising
Father & Son Construction Co. of Troy, Mich., used its understanding of compact efficiency to win a Pinnacle Award with its mini-compact disc.

The judges were struck by this tool's ability to project a sophisticated image and its effectiveness in a variety of situations. By using the CD as a business card (it's about that size), Father & Son could stand out from the crowd at home shows and meetings with potential clients. But that's where the benefits only begin - potential clients can pop the CD into a computer and watch a multimedia presentation about the company.

The CD's combination of brevity and comprehensive information was impressive. "They got a lot across, and it wasn't so long it would bore someone to death," Nagel said. He also appreciated the CD's ability to display detailed pictures without being connected to the Internet - a concern for those without fast Internet connections.

Judge Kimberly Sweet appreciated the economics of the CD. "Once the first presentation is produced, it can be up-dated easily," she said. "And it's fairly cheap to burn more CDs." She also said consumers would be less likely to throw away a CD than a print ad, giving Father & Son's entry staying power lacking in some traditional ads.



RLS Construction's newsletter promotes teamwork.



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Direct Mail: Crack a smile

Not only did Case Design/ Remodel-ing Inc.'s winning entry have the judges chuckling, they also appreciated Case's ability to design an entire direct-marketing campaign, not just a single direct-mail piece. By developing a series of humorous pieces using the same look and feel, Case, located in Bethesda, Md., hoped to convince upper-middle-class families in the Washington area to expand their bathrooms to keep pace with their growing families.

One door hanger featured a 1950s black-and-white picture of a woman washing her hair in a sink, accompanied by the question, "Does your bath lack modern amenities?"

The question, Sweet said, would engage potential customers and draw them into learning more about the company by reading the back side of the piece. She also liked that "Case didn't try to put its whole sales brochure into its direct-mail campaign."

Well-defined messages are more effective than vague ones, and Case's campaign specifically targeted bathroom business. Instead of diluting the focus of its marketing efforts with endless details, Case drove home one message hard: If you've got a crowded bathroom, make it bigger and better by updating and enhancing existing floor space.

Large remodelers often have a budget advantage over smaller ones and can sometimes afford the type of marketing efforts smaller businesses don't even think about. Nagel remarked that most remodelers could handle the relatively modest cost of producing postcards and door hangers, but most would have to hire help to come up with a creative, clutter-busting concept.

Home-Show Booth: And to your left . . . the Taj Mahal

OK, so it wasn't quite the Taj Mahal. But The Bainbridge Crew's home-show booth went above and beyond. In the home-show environment, generating traffic to your booth is the name of the game. Bainbridge, of Charlotte, N.C., knew that and spent more than a year designing and building its own booth when it couldn't find a booth builder able to fulfill its vision. Eight people are required to prepare the 800-square-foot booth for each show.

Krengel said Bainbridge's entry was interesting because it demonstrated successful home-show marketing. "You just don't see booths like that. They truly made a commitment. Most remodeling companies don't target home shows to that extent. Bainbridge showed how promoting through home shows could pay off."

Nagel said Bainbridge's entry was without a doubt the best entry and better than most booths he has seen. But he also said, "One percent of one percent of remodelers could afford to do that. It had to cost them a fortune."

Speaking of fortunes, how about giving potential customers a chance to win a \$10,000 remodeling job or a Caribbean cruise? Those are some of the prizes Bainbridge uses to build a crowd. Regardless of the size of a booth, drawing traffic is always important.

Judge Wendy Cohen said Bainbridge's booth reminded her of large manufacturers' booths. Because of that similarity, she said Bainbridge's booth would help potential clients feel secure with the company. "It was very substantial and reinforced the idea that Bainbridge is a company with a lot of wherewithal that will be around for a while," she said.

Showroom: Sitting on the job

Employees at Coleman Construction Inc. sit on the job. And walk on it. And look at it. In fact, they do business in it. One of their favorite jobs was making their own showroom and office out of a dilapidated historic building in Franklin, Tenn. Coleman demonstrated sophisticated craftsmanship by restoring the old house to something resembling its original ambience, with sleeping and living areas in addition to office space and a product display.

Nagel appreciated how Coleman's showroom demonstrated a wide array of remodeling skills and said too many remodelers have showrooms that are merely display areas for various household accessories.

Krengel said Coleman's house had a strong symbolic meaning. "I thought it showed a lot of commitment to the community. It showed they are there to serve the community as well as to be a part of it." When homeowners have many choices of remodelers, it makes sense to foster warm feelings in the community by contributing to its well-being.

Logo: 'B' is for best

The Bainbridge Crew's logo was judged Pinnacle-worthy, but not without debate. Krengel said the way the logo was built around a "B" was too obvious and simple. Cohen agreed to an extent but added that Bainbridge's logo deserved to win because it promoted feelings of sophistication and respect.

The judges enjoyed the subtle touches such as small hammers within the logo. For Nagel, those small touches were key. He said a logo should communicate what a business does, not just the company's name.

"The other entrants really had no linkage to any type of remodeling," he said. "I like logos that make people think it's a remodeling firm versus any other type of firm. Bainbridge's could be better, but the other ones didn't do it for me at all."

Sweet liked how the logo was consistently and prominently displayed on all company material. She also said the adoption of a classically styled logo was appropriate for Bainbridge's efforts to target the more upscale clientele of Charlotte, surpassing the bunny the company had used in Buffalo, N.Y. (The bunny remains the logo for Bainbridge's handyman division.)

Customer Correspondence: Is it a Hallmark?

If you check the back of the holiday greeting card that won the customer correspondence category, you won't



Tasteful, relevant humor helped Case Design/Remodeling develop a solid direct-mail campaign.



A booth that's as big and well-constructed as some homes can't fail to grab attention at a show.



Remodeling a home into a showroom showcases quality remodeling work as well as manufacturers' products.



The Bainbridge Crew logo is bold, classic and consistent.

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see Hallmark's famous crown logo. You won't see any logo. And that's just fine with remodeler McGuire, Hearn & Toms Inc., winner of the category.

Each year the Manakin-Sabot, Va., company shuns the mass-produced feel of store-bought holiday cards in favor of cards featuring original artwork by the firm's president and lead designer, C. Mason Hearn Jr.

The 2000 season card featured a drawing of a wall of windows the company had created for a client. Inside the card were a holiday greeting and an explanation of the art.

Sweet said the time and effort put into designing original cards sends the right message to potential clients. "It shows that customers matter. Anyone can go out and buy a box of cards. The cards make it seem like their work is the result of a very individualized process."

The judges admired the simplicity of the card and were glad sales pitches didn't mar its refreshing originality. Because the card wasn't cluttered, its recipients were left to admire the company's work and appreciate good design.

Special Promotional Events: Lights, camera . . . revenue

Poulin Design Remodeling of Albuquerque, N.M., won the special promotional event category using a movie-themed ad campaign to draw prospects to its "Remodeling Night Out." Revenue to date generated from the event is more than \$105,000, and company president Tom Poulin expects that the remodeling industry's long sales lead time means the event will continue generating sales for several years.

Though the revenue figure alone might be enough to justify Poulin's prize, the judges were impressed with much more than money. Poulin stood out from the other entrants by creating its own event. Instead of buying a sponsorship and being featured as a part of another, larger event, Poulin went solo and didn't have to share traffic - or profits - with other companies. Sweet said Poulin's independence in organizing the event could help potential clients think Poulin is a solid company with the strength to stand on its own.

The judges also appreciated the strategic timing of the event. Remodelers often accept slow periods without putting up a fight, but Remodeling Night Out was meant to build business during the normally dismal October-to-December period. Cohen was impressed by Poulin's comprehensive effort. From promoting the event with radio and newspaper advertising to revenue-generating follow-up after the event, Poulin had the complete package.

Web Site: A technical knockout

Krengel, the judge most experienced in all things virtual, pushed for Winans Construction Inc. of Oakland, Calif., to win Pinnacle's Web site category. "The Winans site was built correctly from a technical standpoint, and that's where most sites fail," she said.

For instance, common elements that appear on every page are always placed in the same place, allowing those images to be stored in memory rather than repeatedly downloaded. Krengel said Winans' decision not to use frames on its site was wise because some Web browsers, especially older versions, aren't frames-enabled, causing viewing problems when they encounter frames. She also liked the use of metatags to improve the site's chances of appearing during pertinent search-engine queries.

Krengel also said Winans' Web site had quality content. For instance, she liked that Winans listed the locations of the projects it showed on the site, communicating to prospective clients the geographic area it serves. She also said the "Contact Winans" section helped the site stand apart from the competition by explaining the process of entering a relationship with the company.

"It was wonderful for people who have never used a remodeler before," Krengel said. "This section really helps Winans set themselves apart and goes a long way to establishing a comfort level with prospects that other companies don't attempt. Many times homeowners want to work with a remodeler but don't know what to expect in regards to the budget, setting up meetings and getting started with the work."

Some of the judges were initially attracted to other Web sites with more pictures and flashier designs. After discussion, they agreed that practical mattered more than pretty. While the judges viewed the Web sites on a computer with a high-speed T1 connection, many homeowners use slower dial-up modems, creating frustration when viewing large images with long download times.

Sales Brochure: A case of quality

The judges thought the high quality and comprehensive nature of Case Design/Remodeling Inc.'s sales brochure would give prospective clients the feeling that Case does quality work.

What set the Case brochure apart was the introduction, aimed at helping potential clients understand the Case philosophy. It covered topics such as company history, the type of remodeling professionals Case hires and the Case process.

"Potential clients want to feel that their remodeler has a process and that they've done similar jobs before and know what works," Sweet said.

Cohen agreed that the company's focus on the remodeling process was key to the brochure's effectiveness. She also liked the flowchart, which showed which Case divisions - kitchen, bath, design/ build and handyman - handle which services.

The judges were also impressed with the production quality and overall content. "It was very easy to read," Cohen said. "The illustrations were high-quality. They showed small and large projects, so I thought they did a good job of appealing to a wide market."

Quality has a price. "Very few remodelers could afford that [piece]," Nagel said. "This one stood out in my



Hand-drawn holiday cards spread good cheer to clients.



Hosting a special event provides measureable marketing results: big crowds and big sales.



In addition to looking good, Web sites need to function well; a home page that downloads quickly and a consistent navigation bar are musts.



Elegant style and an abundance of substance made this sales brochure a standout.

mind as far superior. It was very tastefully done. It got my highest marks. It was awesome."

Dave Wolkowitz is the founder of MarketSting, a Chicago-based marketing consultancy. Visit www.marketsting.net for more information or e-mail him at dave@marketsting.net.

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