



Crafting Your Message: Marketing for Designers

By Thom O'Leary, Apparenza Design Studio

PART I (As seen in ASFD December 2004 Bulletin)

As furniture designers, we're used to wearing many different hats: artist, engineer, stylist and businessperson. When it comes to designing a chair or dresser, there is a degree of "instinct" that guides our choices – will it look right, will it fall down, how can I do this better? These instincts have been developed with a little bit of guidance, a lot of practice, some trial and error, and a desire to build upon your strengths. Marketing follows the same path, and can seem just as natural.

Marketing is primarily about making an impression and telling a compelling story. How is this done? With creativity. Luckily, as a designer, you already have a good measure of that. The real question is how to direct it towards a goal... how to get from "here" to "there" and play to your strengths. There are a few simple, very effective things that you can start to think about *today* that can make a significant difference in your marketing efforts.

Craft a Consistent Image

A few years ago there was a buzzword in the ad industry: "branding." Since then, branding has graduated from being just a buzzword into a vital concept in business. The idea is simple: every contact that a company has with a client/consumer is an opportunity to make a good impression, or to build upon an impression. Everything related to your company (especially your work) gives an impression of what your company represents and can do. There are many ways to make a first impression, but when there is a consistent image between the first impression and the second, third... that image becomes more memorable, more powerful and more uniquely yours. The details are important – the logo, color theme and typeface you use on your business cards, letterhead, portfolio and website set up the first impression of who you are, and the quality of your work. If you specialize in traditional

furniture, your image should convey that without needing a photo or paragraph to explain it, and it should be conveyed through everything you touch. This is similar to a well-pressed interview suit and a firm handshake. Each element needs to contribute consistently to the whole impression; a genuine impression of who you are that comes from the same intimate, creative place as your design work. This is the setting of the stage for you to...

Tell Your Story

But first, you need to find and craft your story. Where did you begin? What first inspired you? What do you love about furniture design? What are you most proud of? How do you want people to remember you? There is one key to telling your story well: it needs to *engage, entertain, inform*, and most importantly lead to a dialogue/conversation with the target audience. This works for interviews, press releases, website content and dinner conversation, and again, your story will be most impactful when it is consistent with all the other elements that make up your crafted message.

Be Prepared

Although your "survival kit" will be different from what's listed in the Boy Scout Handbook, their motto is just as appropriate in marketing. *Have your materials ready*. A gambler once told me that a lot of "luck" is being prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they arise. If you can give a potential lead, good contact, or reporter a *branded* business card that refers them to a *branded* site showing some of your work and tells your *branded* story, there is a solid chain of events. The quicker and easier you can get a message through to someone, the better chance it will pay off.

Find the Story in Every Piece You Design

Once you have a story, find the story behind your work. The questions are basic: What inspired it? Where can you imagine it being used? This is more than a materials list and basic description, it is an expression of the concept and essence behind your work, and no one can understand this more intimately than the designer. Share that, and your enthusiasm will elicit an *emotional* response that connects with the audience on a deep level. This can act as the fulcrum in a marketing campaign, and elevate the perception of our work from simply being furniture to furniture-as-art.

Coordinate with your Manufacturer

Share your story, the story of each piece, the name of each line you design, and the core concept behind them with your manufacturer. At every level of the market, there is some degree of marketing finesse. If

you are in that equation, and your message is consistent, your manufacturer's efforts will be in line with your own efforts, and help you take them that much further without ten times the effort. Good marketing helps sell furniture – a designer's story can be an effective part of good marketing.

Be Involved

ASFD is a great organization! Stay in touch, come to meetings, read the newsletters and get involved. Networking is a fact of life, and the more that people know about you (and the better that they know you) the more opportunities will appear.

Even with a brief run-through of some very basic marketing ideas, there is still a lot more to cover. This article is continued online at www.ApparenzADesign.com - click on "ASFD Marketing."

PART II

Be Aware

Every industry has its trade journals, organizations and information networks. The furniture industry also has an additional news outlet: mainstream magazines. From *House Beautiful* to *Elle Décor*, there are niche magazines to cover nearly every style and taste, with a large portion of the content devoted to reporting on (or starting) trends in home fashion. As important as staying up with events in the industry itself (import/export legislation, material shortages, etc.) being up to date on current style trends and tech innovations can help you identify the direction of things and shape your message accordingly.

If You Have a Card, Play It

Not everything is newsworthy. (But a lot of things are.) The trick is knowing the difference. If you've designed a major collection ("major" is defined primarily by how you tell the story) or have earned an award nomination, you have a card... but you haven't won the game yet. Having an accomplishment that you keep to your self may be good for self-confidence, but it doesn't contribute to your marketing efforts. Likewise, touting an accomplishment without having a follow-through plan is like casting out a hook without a fishing line attached. Your "card" or "hook" may be a big new contract, a milestone (20 years in business, 50 pieces in current production), an award, a magazine article, a piece appearing on the set of a TV show, etc. When you have a card, play it – send out a

press release, ask your manufacturer to send out a press release, call in favors, talk to anyone who will listen. Just don't let a good opportunity get away.

Stay in Touch

People like to hear good news, and people like people who bear good news. Since it is the Holidays, your holiday card list should still be handy (no need to dust it off). Periodically throughout the year (four or five times, particularly before and/or after the Markets) it's good to send out a quick note to your colleagues, clients (and past clients, and prospective clients), your dentist, your neighbors, your friends – anyone on your list – and include a brief update on what you've been doing. A photo of something you worked on is great, and it doesn't need to be formal. The point of this is to stay in touch, so that your name (and your story/image, which is reinforced through your notes) stays on people's minds. What is the point of this? Consider it "seeding the clouds" – creating an opportunity for opportunities to arise.

Use Your Connections

Part Two of "Staying in Touch" is to use the connections that you have. From the PR department of your alma mater, to the local reporter you met at a mutual friend's house-party, everyone has some "connections." Some are obvious – your clients and their PR firms, for example. Many are hidden: your cousin, who you haven't seen in 15 years (but whose name is on your mailing list), lives next door to a reporter for a trade journal, or a wood importer, or a major furniture retailer. How could you know? You can't, but by casting a wide net, and staying in touch, connections that you weren't aware of can be revealed to you. Tell your story, show your image, and share your excitement about doing what you love to do.

Thom O'Leary and his business partner Frank M. Spano are members of the ASFD and formed Apparenza Design Studio to develop transitional, high-end furniture for the US and European markets. Thom has a background in marketing and Product Placement in TV/films, and welcomes your feedback about this article. Please contact him at Studio@ApparenzaDesign.com.