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Talking about Promotion

HELLER: Illustrators are no different from any other businesspeople in that they must promote themselves by putting their names and styles out into the marketplace. As an educator, how do you advise your students to do this effectively, efficiently, and in a manner that earns them viable attention?

ARISMAN: Art directors, in my experience, view promotion pieces very differently. Some rely on them to hire new talent and some disregard them, relying on the portfolio drop-off, interviews, or annuals to supply their needs. My advice to students who cannot afford to pay the going rate for *Showcase*, *R.S.V.P.*, *The Black Book* or numerous other promotion vehicles is to never send a single card or a one-page with many unrelated samples on it.

By the end of the first semester in the first year of the MFA program each student is required to develop a series (minimum six images) with a narrative or theme. The images must explore a variety of forms (animal, human) and incorporate the form into environments. The words should be minimal. A title short paragraph or condensed running text. These “visual essays” are hand bound into small booklets or accordion folds and printed out on the computer (minimum of twenty-five). The students are asked to submit a general list of art directors, publications, and editors that the promotion piece is aimed at.

Categories, children’s books, editorial, etc., are discussed in relationship to the content of the promo piece. Students research annuals, bookstores, etc., to identify individual art directors whose commission work they respect. I advise students to not get too clever with the promo piece. No tricky folds, no elaborate packaging, and no originals. The intent is a clear presentation of their ideas in a visual essay.

My rationale for sending a visual essay instead of a single image in a promotion piece is simply that the art director can get a better grasp on how the artists thinks and forms an idea. The added component is that it’s harder to throw away a small book. After years of doing this I know it works. Not for everybody right away, but it starts the process of moving into the outside

world with your images. Some students have gotten jobs immediately. Some receive replies of interest from art directors and requests to see their portfolios and some get no response until their next promotion piece. This is an ongoing process, not a one-shot piece. Take the time and energy to send a promotion piece that is worth sending.

As an art director, what is your personal view of receiving promotion pieces? How many do you receive each day? Have you ever hired someone or called him to see his portfolio because of a promo piece?

HELLER: I receive as many as thirty postcards a week and at least a dozen URLs for illustrators' Web sites. It's more than too much for two very good reasons. One, I simply cannot process that many artists—many of whom are quite good judging from the postcard. Two, as a form, postcards are not very distinctive. Frankly, I tend to discard them after a week or two because I just don't have the space to keep them in a visible place.

Have I hired someone based on the promo? Yes and no. I usually do not, but one of my key *Book Review* artists, Mark Summers, was first hired purely on the basis of a promotional package that included a file of sheets with watercolor images that were awful, but tucked among them were a few "bookmarks" with portraits in his now inimitable engraving-like scratchboard style. He was "floating" them, as it were. Trying them out for the first time, and I took the bait. Were there others who I hired this way? Honestly, I cannot remember. While I am impressed by many cards I've seen, I prefer to meet the artists, and that's when I feel more compelled to give them work.

But while on the subject of promo pieces I have a slightly different take than you. Or maybe we have the same feelings but express it differently. I agree that the idea of telling a story in six or more images is useful. I further agree that a package of disparate samples is not the most effective way of getting a personality across, and, finally, the postcard format is too generic. But I am not opposed to making a conceptual promotion. The worst idea is one that tries too hard to be clever, but a clever presentation free from artifice is worth its weight in gold.

I remember years ago Henrik Drescher used to mail handmade books as promotions to selected art directors. They were too good to throw out (and honestly, I thought that some day they might be valuable, too). Today I feel that book making is as overdone as postcards. But that's because

many illustrators who make book-like promotions are really just replicating their portfolio; the book is not a book per se, but a collection of disparate images. Today I'm more apt to save a piece that looks like considerable thought was put into its conception and manufacture. For example, I am a total sucker for anything done in letterpress because this tells me three things about the illustrator: One, that he or she understands fine printing. Two, that he or she has aesthetic taste. Three, there is a level of design sophistication that hopefully will also be apparent in the artwork, as well.

I guess this leads to another point that is important to me. It's one thing to be able to illustrate intelligently, it's another to have a holistic sense of visual communications. If I see that a promotion piece is smartly conceived I have more faith that the artist has intelligence. If the art lives up to this promise then he or she's got a great one-two punch.

So, what other ways do you suggest that illustrators get their work seen by those who will do them the most good?

ARISMAN: The concept of promotion is a step-by-step process regardless of what form it takes (mailers, booklets, gallery announcements, etc.). The first step is to identify the people (art directors, collectors, etc.) who show interest in your work. The second step is to stay in contact. For example: you send out a mailer and get a note back, "Nice work. Stay in touch." A month later you get an assignment from another magazine, you have a small show in a gallery, you have a new piece you are really excited about. You send it to the interested party with a short note—"Thank you for the nice note you sent me regarding my work. I've enclosed a copy of (tear sheet, gallery announcement, new piece) for your files."

Send them an announcement of your new Web site. Web sites are good vehicles for promotion but the same rules apply. Only put up what you are most proud of, not what you think *they* will buy. If you are located in a big city, go to openings—Society of Illustrators, American Illustration, Art Directors Club, etc. Bring your promo cards—if the opportunity seems appropriate, talk to art directors and give them a way to see more of your work. *Never* bring your portfolio to an opening. *Always* know what kind of work (publication, book jackets, etc.) the art director does. Too many young illustrators don't take the time and effort to research the names of art directors and familiarize themselves with past images they commission.

Look for juried shows, etc. Make note of the jury. If you don't know them, find out what they do. Most shows have unpublished sections. If you

can submit in more than one category, each category will have a different jury. Your chances are better of getting something in if you spread out a little. For example: Promotion (advertising category), Editorial, and Unpublished. If you get into an annual, you can print out copies of your page and send it out to potential clients.

It is my theory all art directors have the names of ten illustrators in their minds at any given moment. These are people they have worked with before and know can deliver. Your problem (goal) is to become one of those ten names. This is a catch-22. "Come back and see me when you have some published work," is a comment made often. Obviously, if they gave you some work, you would have published work.

Your options are to find ways of reminding them that you are still alive, still working and creating new things. This assumes, of course, that these art directors have shown you some encouragement previously. The reminders (promo pieces, tear sheets, getting in an annual, etc.) will eventually shift their focus to connecting your name to your work. One day they will take a chance on you. If all goes well you will eventually become one of the ten names in their brain.

Steve, is there any other means of promotion that I've forgotten?

HELLER: The best promotion is being published. Becoming visible and making sure that art directors believe that you are a commodity is the best way to get published more and more. When I first started as an art director I looked at magazines (and the occasional annual) because an artist is validated after being published. While I take great pride these days in using artists who have never been published, my eyes still open wider if I see something in a magazine that looks great. Sure this is the real catch-22; but if one gets that foot in the door, with a little more luck it will open wider.

Self-Promotion Guidelines

Don't Jump-Start. A promotion plan takes time, energy, and money. Do not promote your work prematurely.

School Is Out. Send a promotion piece to get work, not to get feedback. Art directors are not paid to be teachers. The response you want is an assignment not a critique.

Group Support. Before sending out a promotion piece, get opinions from others: teachers, former classmates, professional illustrators. Then ask yourself if *you* were the art director, how would *you* respond to your promotion piece.

Junk Mail. If you don't know who to send your promotion piece to, you have not done your research. Know where your work is best suited and to whom your mailing is best targeted.

Promotion Ideas to Avoid. Don't get too cute or tricky. Don't scent your paper. Don't send a package that is more interesting than your work. Don't include your resume. Don't include work that you don't want to do.

Form Follows Function. You are trying to present your work as professionally as possible. For some illustrators a single card might do it. For others, a series of images is more appropriate. Self-editing is crucial.

