

# The Art of Self-Promotion

**A**n art director's office is a veritable disaster area somewhere between a child's playroom and a town dump. Picture this: A desk besieged by paper; table tops stacked with files, folders, manuscripts, layout boards and God knows what else hidden underneath; flat files stuffed with junk dating back to the year 1 B.C. (Before Computer); shelves overflowing with books large and small, perhaps a forgotten muffin or two; and walls bulging with posters, pictures, and scores and scores of artists' promos—not just any promos, but the very best ones. Yes, even the best can fill entire walls, file drawers and boxes.

If you still think that your drab little self-promotional card with that meager black and white reproduction of what you must think is your cleverest work is going to get noticed, think again. The number of self-promotions that the average art director or art buyer receives on a weekly basis comes perilously close to the amount of junk mail received weekly by the average American. For some art directors artists' promotions are, in fact, little more than junk mail. So what's an illustrator to do?

Plenty.

Self-promotion must be every bit as creative as illustration itself. Although there are formulaic-looking cards, an artist's promotion should be anything but formulaic. In fact, these cards, booklets and flyers are critical to business success since face-to-face interviews with art directors are rare. Their purpose, therefore, is to conquer the art director's heart and

mind. Without promotion that attracts immediate attention, sticks in the memory and stands out on the art director's wall, the illustrator is an invisible presence, as likely to get a job as fish will grow feet.

Clever promotions do get reasonable, if not sometimes excellent results. Amy Guip (see interview on page 96) says that she still finds her first cards tacked up on art directors' walls. Many art directors admit that with so much visual stimulation around them everyday, a good promotion is the only viable reminder they have. Promotions are worth the effort, but the results will only be commensurate with the amount of effort put into them.

Of course, there are exceptions to the rule. Brad Holland (see interview on page 74) has never produced self-promotional materials or even taken out the smallest ads in the myriad promotional books. Instead he entered work in and was selected for all



(Above) Gary Baseman's stationery and promotional card packet is a roughly hewn but consistent identity. **Illustrator: Gary Baseman; Designer: Tod Waterbury, Tod Waterbury Design.** (Below) Elegant and simple characterize Stephen Alcorn's stationery, mailing labels and business card which includes an original linocut titled *The Troubadour*. **Illustrator/designer: Stephen Alcorn.**

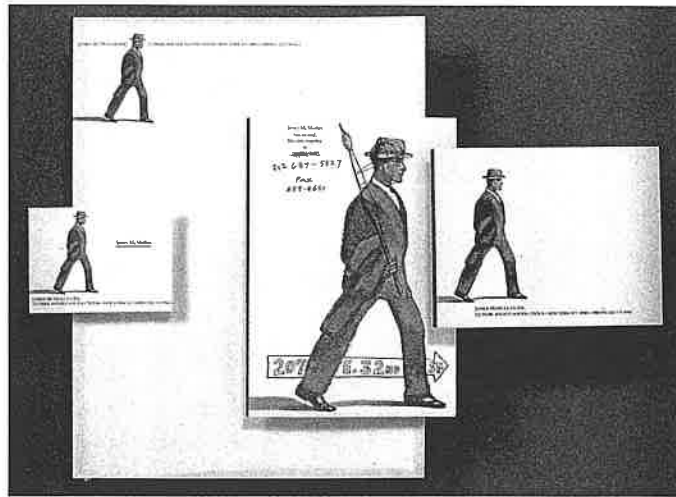
the major competitions. Likewise, Guip insists that the bulk of her work comes from other published work. But these experiences are anomalies. When looking for work most illustrators must create some kind of promotional medium, if only to remind art directors of their existence. Even Henrik Drescher (see interview page 92), who denies ever formally engaging in a concerted self-promotional campaign, has created scores of hand-made, mail-art and Xerox books which, in the early part of his career, were sent to friends and art directors and were undoubtedly the reason he received so much attention. That they were handmade books gave them cachet, that the examples were more like sketchbooks than a portfolio of slick printed works gave them allure.

However, it is rare, though not impossible, that a mere promotional card will make waves. Nevertheless, ambitious promos *will* get noticed. For evidence and inspi-

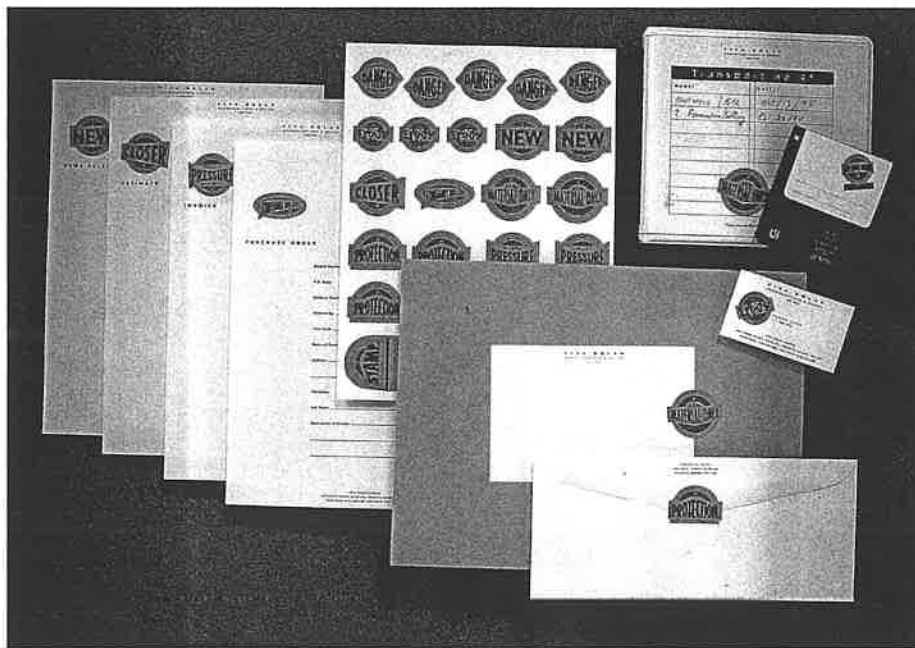
ration look through *HOW* magazine's annual self-promotion issue. Every year illustrators come up with novel ideas that exhibit their talents, intellect and ingenuity, from putting work on computer disk or CD-ROM to distributing quirky little souvenirs. For example, years ago Leslie Cabarga had pencils manufactured with his name and telephone number on them. Every time an art director wrote a message Carbaga's name flashed

into view. Thomas Kerr printed notepads showing different drawings to remind the note writer of his work. Similarly Ross Macdonald sends out personally illustrated desk calendars with easel backs like the local bank or neighborhood garage. Art directors who use them can't avoid Macdonald's hypnotic presence. Even more brazen are those like Gary Baseman who have sent out promotional t-shirts. Not only do they serve as reminders but they telegraph the illustrator's name to the world. Certain illustrators, presuming

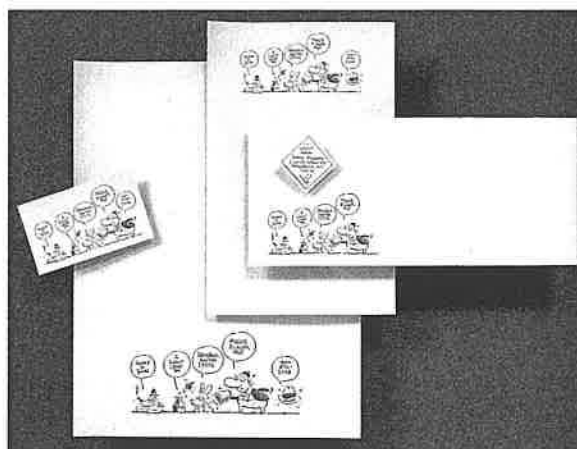




(Top) James McMullan's personal logo, a walking man rendered in watercolor, is used on his stationery and mailing materials. For a moving announcement he added an extra prop. **Illustrator/designer: James McMullan.**

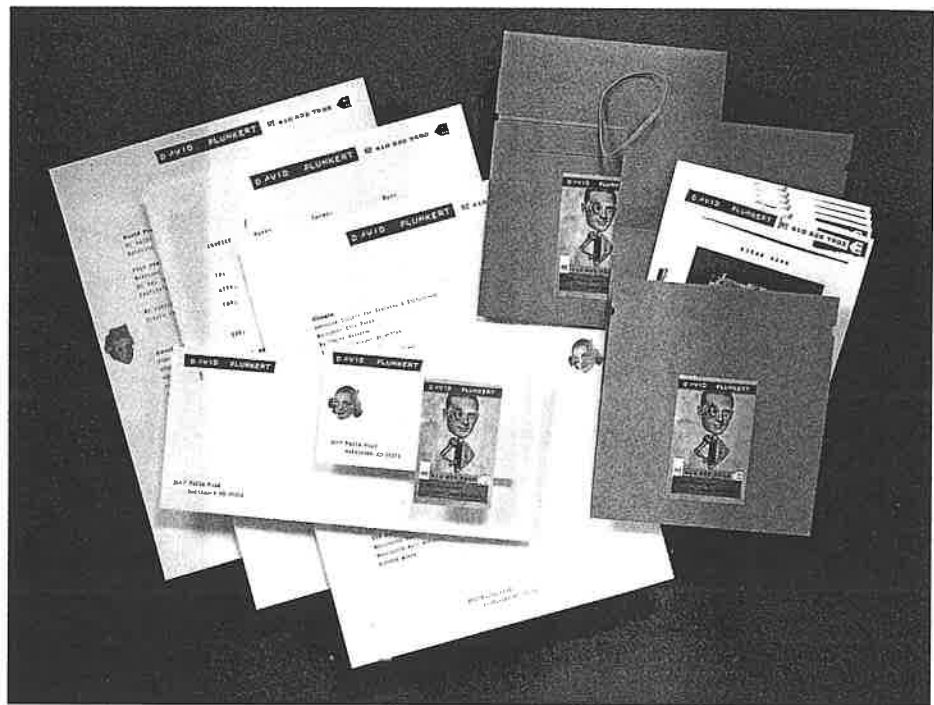
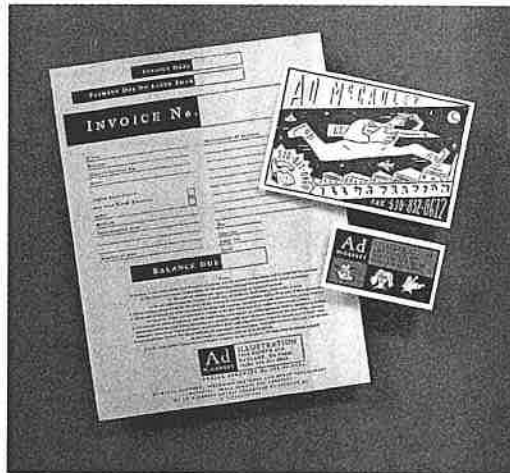


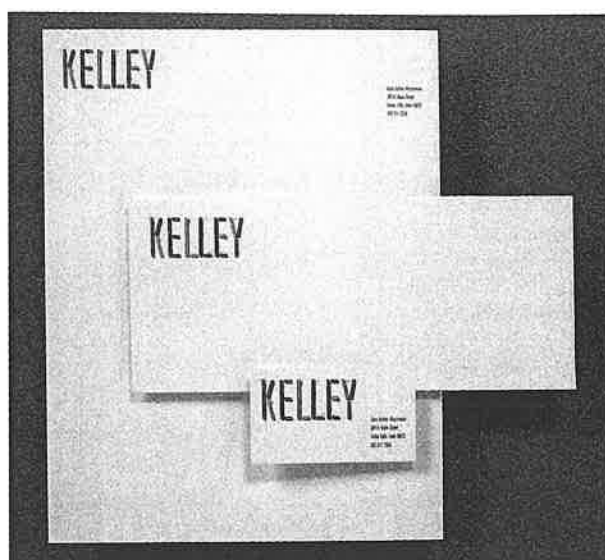
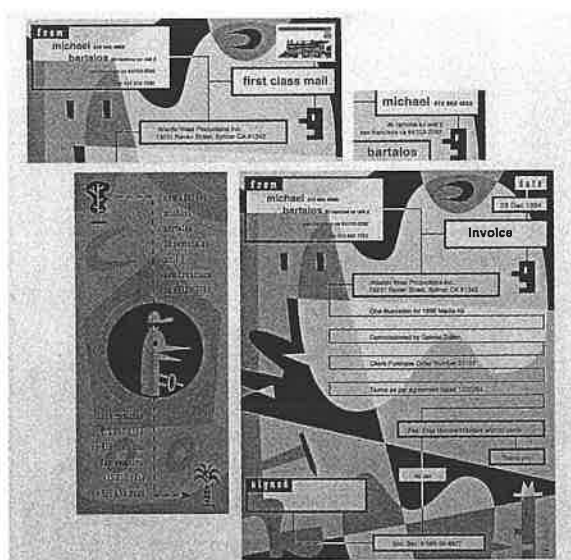
(Center) Frank Viva's ambitious stationery program includes a collection of eye-catching stickers that can be used in various combinations on letters, disks and bills. **Illustrator: Frank Viva; Designer: Frank Viva, Viva Dolan Communications & Design, Toronto.**



(Bottom) The stationery program for cartoonist/illustrator Elwood Smith shows a collection of his delightful characters. **Illustrator/designer: Elwood H. Smith.**

(Top) Adam McCauley has an official billhead while his business card and promotional mailer are more playful. Illustrator/designer: Adam McCauley. (Center) David Plunkert's identity system ranges from cards and envelopes to an impressive promo card package. Illustrator/designer: David Plunkert. (Bottom) James Kraus' stationery has a variety of different sized and colored cards and letters accompanied by a handsome chapbook. Illustrator: James Kraus; Designers: James Kraus and Fritz Klaetke.





that even the most callous art director would have to think twice before throwing away an original work, send out drawings or limited edition prints. Every time an art director wavers before disposing of a promotion the artist's name becomes more memorable. Mailing envelopes are also a frequently used vehicle for original promotional art. Colos, an Eastern European illustrator with a popular style, drew bodies below the stamps on his envelopes.

The images were so witty and clever that art directors who received them were compelled to tack them to the wall. Moreover, in the clutter of anonymous envelopes, the personally illustrated one can be a real eyecatcher.

Coinciding promotions with seasons, holidays or special events is another common strategy. While Santa Claus brings gifts for good little boys and girls, the United States Postal Service delivers art directors Christmas cards by the truckload.

The downside, of course, is that Christmas is not the most propitious time to grab anyone's attention. While Santa has hundreds of elves to keep track of his correspondence, the average art director probably has no help whatsoever. The Christmas season is usually when editorial and advertising art directors are the most crunched, so even the best Christmas cards may get tacked on a wall for the duration of the holiday, but otherwise ignored.

Halloween is the next most popular holiday for illustrators, and not surprisingly offers even more creative opportunities. However, with too many greeting cards competing for attention even the better ones can get edged out. If an illustrator wants to do a seasonal or holiday project, it's wiser to pick those times when cards are unexpected, like Veterans Day, Simchas Torah or National Secretary Day.

There are, however, limits to creativity when the promotion(s) are a nuisance. Amidst exces-

(Left) Michael Bartalos uses many iconic comic characters in stationery that is at once boisterous and alluring. **Illustrator/designer: Michael Bartalos.** (Right) Gary Kelley identifies himself with pastels that combine to spell out his name. While this does not highlight his drawing style, it is nevertheless delightfully eye-catching. **Illustrator: Gary Kelley; Designer: Mike Schroeder.**

### Award Rewards

The various illustration awards are by far the best form of self-promotion for me. I find they are relatively inexpensive to enter compared with the ad space you can purchase in professional indexes. Also, competitions are usually judged by high-profile art directors and designers. The work is therefore selected on its merits by experts in the field, ensuring that winning pieces are displayed in good company.

—Frank Viva

(Top left) Seasonal promotions are quite popular. Linda Bleck's Halloween diecut promo, rendered in scratchboard, unfolds into a candle holder. Illustrator: Linda Bleck.

(Top right) Amy Guip's illustrations are collected as a box of postcards titled New York, a great gift and promo. Illustrator: Amy Guip.

(Center) A good calendar can be a year-round way to show off work. Here are examples by Ross Macdonald (left), designers: John Pylpoczak, Diti Katona/Concrete Design, Toronto; Rafal Oblinski (center), designer: Ann Murphy; and Steven Guarnaccia (right), designer: Scott Christie/Concrete Design, Toronto.

(Bottom left) Thematic promotions make good gifts. Sandra Dionisi's deck of real playing cards is a great showcase for her work. Designer: Sunil Bhandari.

(Bottom right) With a varied collection of sizes and shapes Sandra Dionisi has a promotion card for every occasion. The novel variations build an expectation in the recipient for an exciting series of promotions.

Designers: Barbara Woolley, Bob Hambly/Hambly & Wooley, Inc., Toronto. Her Christmas cards not only offer holiday cheer, but sell her talents, too. Left and center, designer: Sunil Bhandari; right: Christopher Noble, Nobleworks.



sive competition the tendency to go overboard should be avoided. One rather common occurrence is the envelope that contains confetti guaranteed to spill onto everything. The recipient of such an unwelcome gift will doubtless ignore the card and the artist's effort will be for naught. Another unwanted trope is the gimmicky jigsaw puzzle which when and if a recipient puts it together reveals a promotional message. While in theory this might seem like a fun idea, no art director or art buyer has the time to play such games. There are many such whimsical ideas that take time, effort and money to produce but owing to their complicated nature will yield little return.

The best way to promote oneself is often the simplest. Less is more when handled with taste, intelligence and, above all, self-respect. The latter is the key. It doesn't matter what the form—a card, flyer, booklet, portfolio, folder, etc.—if it reveals the ability of its maker to control his or her work. This implies that, whatever goes into the promotion should be thought out. If the promotion is a single item, it should be the very best. If it is



(Top) When Jeffrey Fisher decided to move from Australia to France he created a mini-Ouija board to comically show his comings and goings. Illustrator/ designer: Jeffrey Fisher. (Below) Mark Ryden's neatly packaged cards not only indicate the range of his talents but the fact that he understands the power of good design. Illustrator: Mark Ryden.

a series, it should represent intelligent editing. Presentation should not be underestimated. Illustrators without typographic skills should hire a graphic designer to select and compose the type, design a personal logo, or fabricate a total package. For some illustrators having a custom designed "identity" is every bit as useful as exhibiting a graphic persona through the work. An identity provides a framework for future promotions. It is a clear signpost that becomes familiar to art directors and art buyers over time.

### Art That Sells Itself

I feel that most direct mail and follow-up phone call promotion borders on harassment, so I avoid the whole thing. Art directors are busy folks and I figure that trying to "sell" yourself is a waste of their time and my own.  
—Robert Zimmerman

### Advertisements for Myself

A SCORE OF ANNUAL PROMOTIONAL books, paid showcases for illustrator's advertisements, are available to anyone who can afford them. Some are used more than others by art directors and art buyers, some illustrators and their reps swear by them while others swear at them. It is a fact of business life that pro-

## ILLUSTRATIONS FOR SALE

**I**LLUSTRATIONS ARE NOT created for the artist's personal satisfaction and artistic expression or to be hung on a wall, but rather to enhance an idea or to communicate a message. Notwithstanding, from time to time, an illustrator might receive a call from someone who'd like to buy an original piece of art.

Not only is it flattering to have your work seen, enjoyed, appreciated and coveted, but the addition of the unexpected income derived from its sale can also be a nice surprise.

For the last three years, contemporary illustration has appeared in the sales rooms of the Drouot auctions in Paris, at the impetus of chief auctioneer, Claude Boisgirard and of his assessor, Frédéric Bosser. Recognizing the appeal of a piece of art that had a first life as it appeared in the media, possibly adding more meaning to it by connecting it to an event or a time and a place in the world, Bosser gathers together a collection of international, contemporary illustrations for sale to the Parisian public.

The presentation of these works is in the form of a catalog-box stamped with the date and the place of sale, which includes 140 works, all reproduced in color on separate cards on the back of which are written the biography of the artist, the estimated value of the piece and the description of the work.

Sixty or so illustrators are "invited" to participate anywhere from one to four pieces of art, totalling 140 pieces in all. The artists are required to pay 200FF to help with printing costs. In return, they receive 200 cards printed on one side (to be used as promotional items), as well as



Auction catalogs in a box. Art directors: Steven Jinel, Frederic Bosser; Designer: Steven Jinel.

the sale price of the work, minus the commission.

Some of the illustrators who have participated in this adventure are Alberto Ball, Guy Billout, Seymour Chwast, Christopher Corr, Normand Cousineau, Brian Cronin, Robert De Mitchiell, Isabelle Dervaux, Blair Drawson, Jeffery Fisher, Douglas Fraser, Carolyn Gowdy, Steven Guarnaccia, Jeff Jackson, Benoit Jacques, Martin Jarrie, Lionel Koechlin, Anita Kunz, Paul Leith, Jacques de Loustal, Richard Merkin, Cathy Millet, José Ortega, Richard Parent, Ian Pollock, Pierre Pratt, Robert Risko, Mark Ryden, Pol Turgeon, Walter Van Lotringen and

Philippe Weisbecker.

The first auction, which was held April 6, 1991 (there have been five more since), only presented artist's originals of "bandes dessinées." The concept has evolved bit by bit and now comprises the works of illustrators and cartoonists from the entire world including Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, United States, France, Great Britain, Holland, Spain and Switzerland. Bosser and the artists choose the pieces and establish a minimum base price under which the piece cannot be sold. Expenses add up to about 12% (10% plus taxes), to which is added an entry fee of 250FF per work.

More than two hundred people have attended each of these sales, with the number of actual buyers ranging from forty to sixty. The purchasers who buy the most works are between forty and sixty years of age, and the majority of buyers are between twenty and thirty five years old. Seven hundred to eight hundred people visit each exhibition. The works are offered at prices ranging from 700FF to 2,000FF. The high quality of the works offered at reasonable prices allows everyone the chance to purchase a great illustrator's work.

**Information:** Frederic Bosser, 22 rue de Beethoven, 91700 Ste. Genevieve des Bois, France; Telephone: (1) 60 15 55 89; Fax: (1) 42 47 05 84; Auctioneer: Claude Boisgirard, Étude Boisgirard, 2 rue de Provence, 75009 Paris, France; Telephone: (1) 44 70 81 36; Fax: (1) 42 47 0584.



motional books can make an important difference in getting work. If the presentation is exemplary and attention-grabbing, the odds are in favor of earning a decent return on the investment.

Not all illustrators need to have paid advertising, but those who are looking to expand their client base beyond their locality and/or into other media should

takes more effort to do something original, the investment in time and labor is certainly not going waste.

A vast majority of young and veteran illustrators alike may have a body of work that has not been seen on a national level. In this context it is a good idea to show the best samples of the year. Moreover, with the increased demand for reprints,

(Left) Jean Tuttle produced a "The Day of the Dead" handkerchief to celebrate the Mexican festival and promote herself. Illustrator/designer: Jean Tuttle. (Right) The smell of coffee lured potential clients to Jon Valk's lettering studio. Illustrator: Jon Valk; Designers: Jon Valk and Anna Walker. (Below) To promote his children's book and his style, J. Otto Seibold produced Mr. Lunch airplane soap. Illustrator/designer: J. Otto Seibold.



think carefully about making the often expensive investment. For those in margins, it is probably worth testing out an ad at least once. If the decision is to go with an ad an illustrator should pay careful attention to what the advertisement looks like. Remember these books are akin to shopping malls with scores of competing merchants screaming at prospective customers to sample their wares. It's easy to get overlooked in such an environment as styles will invariably clash. An illustrator should be careful to select just the right balance of work, or better yet devise something special for the page(s). Every year Elwood H. Smith, a gifted cartoonist/illustrator, invents an original comic tableau to show a sample of existing work. Smith's first one was titled "How To Draw Cartoons Like Elwood H. Smith," a theme he has continued to develop. While it

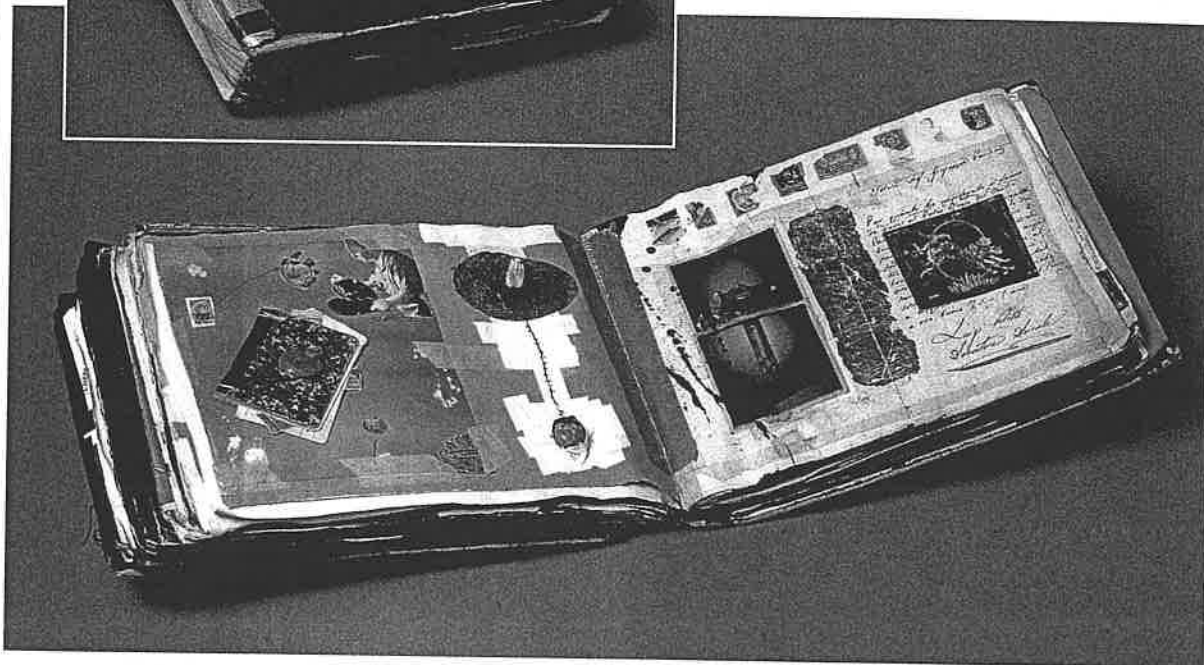
interest may be generated in reusing this existing work.

Bear in mind that some promotional books are aimed at certain regions, while others are national in scope. Not every illustrator should compete on a national level—sometimes it's best to start regionally to allow one's work to mature. Don't set your sights too high or spend too much on a national ad before determining your own viability. Also, before buying into one be sure to investigate the success rate of the particular book by talking to others who have taken out ads. While learning from mistakes can be useful, it's better to avoid some of the





(Left and below) The quirkier the better for Henrik Drescher. His portfolio is really a scrap book filled with ten years of tearsheets and random original art. For good measure and a distinctive patina, he threw it into a filled bathtub.



stupider mistakes at the outset.

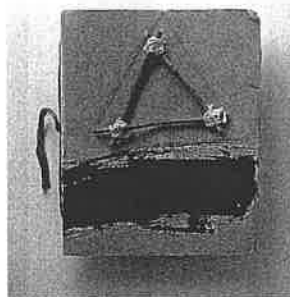
Most promotional books offer overruns or special printings of the page(s) either as part of the basic fee or for an additional charge. For those who cannot afford to print separate promotions these pages are quite useful as mailers or leave-behinds. In any case advertising can be beneficial if used cleverly and intelligently. But even advertising is not a panacea; an illustrator is only as good as the work he or she is advertising.

#### The Portfolio Is Key

**T**HE PORTFOLIO IS A SAMPLE CASE. Maintaining a good one is the key to success and should not be underestimated or overlooked. Despite the emphasis given portfolios in art schools

and illustration courses it is dumbfounding what a large percentage are poorly designed and edited. Among the worst are the manila-envelope and brown-paper-bag variety. Though hard to believe, some wannabes deliver their work as if it just came from a quick copy store. Given the amount of competition, that's plain stupid. Even if a wannabe illustrator gets a rare face-to-face interview, presenting a bag-of-drawings is a turn-off that suggests unprofessionalism and a lack of seriousness.

With all the different kinds of portfolio cases on the market and the potential for unique custom-made displays, an illustrator does not have to resort to ad hocism to be perceived as different. Throw away the manila envelopes, accordion folders and other clerical stationery supplies. Do not put work in a loose-leaf notebook or photo album. And please reject the impulse to



as all editorial kept together or comparing the original alongside the printed version. Some illustrators maintain separate folios for published and unpublished, black and white and color, editorial and advertising, or adult and children-oriented work.

(Left) Drescher also uses small, handcrafted booklets to supplement his portfolio. In a sea of conventional books, these are islands of invention. (Below) Though conventional, Anita Kunz's portfolio is well orchestrated. Included are a score of matted 4x5 transparencies, promotional cards and tearsheets.

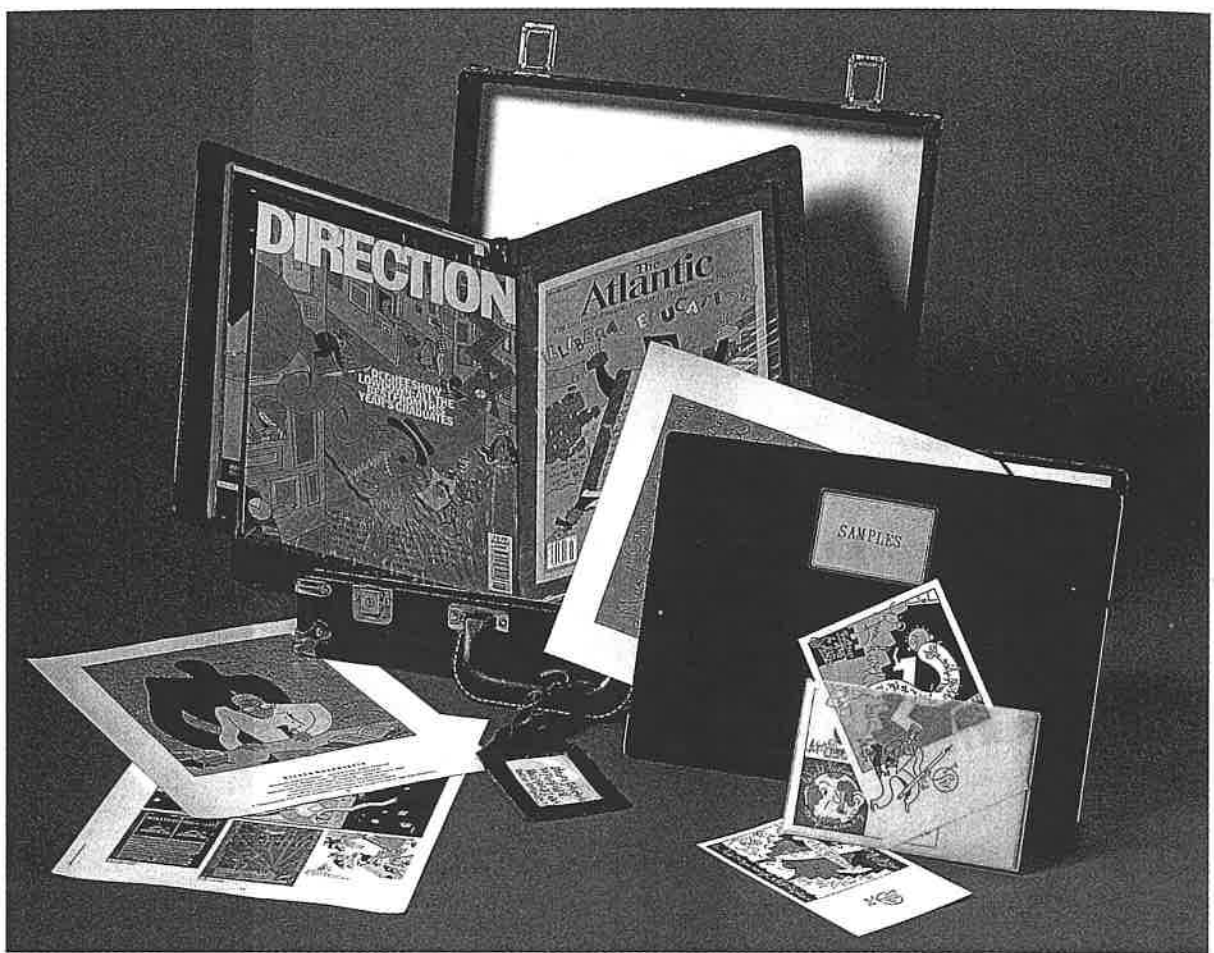
matte every original drawing. What art directors and art buyers want—and what artist's representatives encourage—is a simple case of manageable size and heft, easy to open and close, that keeps the originals or tearsheets protected. Within these elementary parameters a portfolio can then be made of a variety of materials—leather, suede, aluminum, reinforced board, etc.—and come in numerous forms—briefcase, archival box, book, etc.. Most are basic black, some have a logo pasted on or a name embossed on the front.

If standard portfolios do not suit one's personality there is a variety of custom-made options. A good portfolio does not have to be drab, but should not be so excessively encumbered that an art director is afraid to handle it lest it be broken. Keep in mind that a portfolio might be handled as much, if not more than, luggage at an airport.

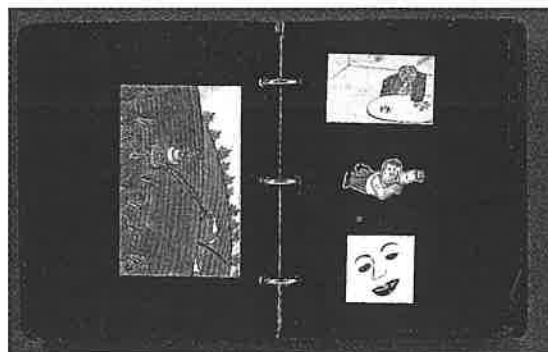
The standard portfolio contains protected sheets or pages that should reveal work as either originals, copies, tearsheets, or transparencies. Depending on the illustrator color might be shown with black and white; published might be shown with unpublished; sketchbooks might be included with more formal work. Whatever the nature of the material, an organizing principle is important, such

While such principles should conform to the artist's personal preferences, there are a few rules of thumb. For example, the most confusing organization is where two or more differing styles are shown together. Since the portfolio must quickly and concisely represent an artist's abilities it is best to differentiate between various styles by segregating them in some manner. Different genres will benefit by segregation also. If the illustrator is interested in doing more book jackets, that work should be





(Above) Steven Guarnaccia prefers printed examples which he puts in two vinyl books. Also included is a cardboard folder with a variety of leave-behind samples. (Right) Steven Guarnaccia's first sketchbook exhibits the naivete of a neophyte but the roots of his professional work are already apparent.



separate from, say, editorial illustration, and so on. A portfolio will benefit from being edited like a book where pacing work is essential. One might start with the most striking or emblematic piece on the opening page, then show a couple of comparable ones on successive spreads, evening out on the next spreads, then building to a crescendo by the end. Every portfolio will be different, but keep in

mind that every portfolio should be consistently interesting.

Unconventional portfolios are sometimes the most interesting, if only for their form, but to sustain interest the work must be as good if not better than the presentation. Hence, an unconventional portfolio should not overpower the work but complement the artist's vision.

Henrik Drescher's "portfolio" is a constantly growing sketchbook that speaks volumes about the artist's method—and madness—but is not necessarily the best way to present work for those illustrators even with vision. Some of the most effectively quirky portfolios are those that toe a fine line between eccentricity and professionalism with just the right balance between the personal and unconventional approach. A hypothetical example of this

### Books of a Feather

You should have more than one portfolio so that you can send one out and keep one for an emergency or to send somewhere else. Or, if you have a rep, he/she can take one. I still believe that versatility and quality is of the utmost importance to illustrators starting out. As you become more established and refined, you can update your portfolio to define the work you want to do.

—Phil Adams

might be a series of ten transparencies of solid work in addition to three or four handmade books showing anything from sketches to fully realized stories. If the ten transparencies capture the art director's attention, then the quirkier material will reinforce the artist's personality. Therefore, in the balanced unconventional portfolio the viewer is guided first to the professional content, then to the other.

In the final analysis a portfolio can be

neutral in allowing the work to speak for itself or demonstrative in supporting the artist's persona. Those shown in these pages range from seemingly anarchic to professionally stolid. The common thread is that they have all been prepared with attention to the market these illustrators want to appeal to and the terms on which they want to be accepted as artists. Which ever course is chosen, the portfolio should be critically reviewed as often as possible by the artist. The contents should change as new material becomes available, but also if the flow or pacing doesn't quite work. The portfolio is the illustrator's most valuable business asset and should be treated with the same care and maintenance afforded to any other tool.

(Clockwise) Gary Tanhauser's portfolio is an elegant custom-made book with plastic-laminated tear-sheets that have been mounted on black. The electronic portfolio is quickly gaining in popularity. Nancy Stahl's is two Mac diskettes that approximate the traditional slide show. David Klug's portfolio is a spiral bound sketchbook with printed copies of his work. It also serves as an impressive leave behind.

