

BOULDER COUNTY BUSINESS REPORT

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Small, local firms win big accounts

By Suzan K. Heglin

National advertisers are drawing on the talents in Boulder County.

Crispin Porter & Bogusky in Niwot has accounts with Microsoft and Volkswagen, and the Sterling-Rice Group in Boulder has been called on by Kraft and Frontier. However, it isn't just the big companies that are raking in the big-name accounts.

Janice Ferrante, founder of Oblique Design, spent 15 days with no sleep, five of which in the rain, wiping down cars and dealing with various company representatives. In the end she delivered the catalog on time for Lexus. Lexus is part of Toyota _ the biggest auto manufacturer in the world.

"We're the little guys," she said, comparing Oblique Design with the larger ad companies in Boulder. With its office on Walnut and its small staff Boulder - compared to some 300 at Crispin Porter - it might seem like a no-contest.

But it was Oblique that won the Lexus account.

"We get to custom fit our team for the project," said Sarah Michael, who works in accounting for Oblique. For instance, the company knows photographers all over the country and pulls in the best talent for the job.

Then there's the administrative aspect. "Some of those big companies don't want to deal with those layers anymore," Ferrante said.

Small isn't the only draw. Experience and personal chemistry are a critical part of the equation.

Ferrante and Michaels landed the Lexus account by going to the SEMA Show a premier automotive specialty products trade event _ and walking the floors for three days. With a slick BMW brochure they'd produced to their credit they shook the right hands and were able to walk the talk. They could talk knowledgeably about a strut brace and an air infuser and knew just how to photograph them.

"I ride motorcycles avidly," Ferrante said. "I first started with BMW because I did a catalog locally. It started with my passion of motorcycles and turned into cars."

Oblique's niche is print advertising and Web design for auto manufacturers, parts manufacturers and alternative energy companies.

Marr Barr, located in Longmont and working national accounts in public relations and communications for companies like Coca-Cola and the US Dry Bean Council, also feels that its niche comes from personal expertise. Since 2000 the company has specialized in food and agriculture. Both **Amy Barr** and **Liz Marr** are registered dieticians. They had full careers before they started their firm.

"Amy and I are technical experts going into it. We're marketing our expertise," **Marr** said.

They get the attention of some clients by doing volunteer work. "It's a kind of credentialing," **Marr** said. She is currently working with the National Association of Culinary Professionals. "That keeps our names out there among key decision-makers."

Marr Barr prefers the national accounts. "Right now we don't have any local accounts," **Marr** said. "Larger companies understand PR and marketing, and that is a plus for us. They have realistic expectations."

Rick Sterling, co-founder of Sterling-Rice, agreed.

"I almost think that there's more pressure with smaller-stage entrepreneurial companies. There's more anxiety there. They are more at a less structured thought process."

Sterling-Rice also specializes in the food and beverage industry and routinely works for companies like Kraft and Pepsi. It also has local accounts, such as Horizon Natural Foods.

However, there's pressure with the national accounts, too.

"The pressure from working with the Krafts and Pepsis of the world is knowing that they could go anywhere in the world. We ask ourselves, 'Are we good enough? Are we smart enough?' There's some personal psychology that gets into it," Sterling said.

A percentage of Sterling's business is strategy and innovation. "Advertisers interest in us is more around our deep understanding of target audiences and unmet needs.

"We don't usually get hired entirely on reputation. We have to demonstrate relevant experience, and we have to present an idea to them."

It helps that the company often get referred by someone that it has worked with before.

Sterling finds that being located in Boulder helps. "Primarily for international companies we have found Boulder and more specifically Colorado to be part of our brand equity. We are perceived to be more creative (and) have a different perspective."

The natural/organic food industry looks twice at advertising agencies from Colorado. Barr finds location helps her firm. "We're actually on the cutting edge in the Boulder and Denver area with the organic food and agriculture industry here."

Boulder also comes with the expectation of thinking outside the box.

Ferrante said Oblique found that to be true with Lexus. Its accounts had been managed by Team One, a business segment of Saatchi & Saatchi. "They wanted a new company. They had worked with Saatchi for years and wanted new ideas."

Ferrante has confidence in what her company can do. "I feel we can go to Porsche and Jaguar."