

Walking The Walk

About a year ago, I found a coconut in my mailbox, wrapped in a red mesh bag, with a printed tag attached. The tag said: “Use Your Coconut. Think outside the box. Think AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District! From soup to (coco)nuts, AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District delivers—especially when it comes to helping businesses and organizations like yours think outside the box to improve their bottom lines.”

AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District in Pittsburgh has been a client of mine for more than 10 years. I’ve watched them grow from the startup stage to more than \$5 million in sales. More importantly, I think, I’ve watched them evolve, from being a print provider to a full-fledged Marketing Services Provider, becoming a model that other progressive printers can follow.

Designers and Strategists

AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District has always been strong in graphic design. The niches they’ve developed are art-intensive, so they built their capability to match. Then they took the next step 5 years ago when they brought on a Marketing Strategist, and now the Design Team is made up of two strategists and two designers, who collaborate with the Sales Team, which consists of two Account Executives (outside sales), four Account Managers (inside sales/project management) and one Rainmaker (more to follow).

The Account Executives are responsible for building relationships with potential customers. As that’s happening, they bring the Design Team into the process. It’s not uncommon for three or four AlphaGraphics staffers to be in a meeting, with either a customer or a prospect, so there’s rarely a situation where the salesperson has to explain to the designer or strategist (or Account Manager) what the customer or prospect is trying to accomplish. The whole process is designed to shorten the lines of communication, and to make the best use of each team member’s talent and experience. The salespeople don’t have to be marketing experts, and the designers and strategists don’t have to be salespeople.

The Rainmaker

Clare Meehan is the owner of AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District, and she’s a consummate networker. Clare personally developed most of AGCD’s key accounts over the last 6-8 years, and she has built and maintained relationships with hundreds of “movers and shakers” in Pittsburgh’s non-profit community—many of whom also move and shake in the for-profit business community. At this stage, Clare’s role is mostly to help her Account Executives identify and connect with potential customers.

It’s worth mentioning, I think, that Clare has never attended a Chamber Mixer or a BNI meeting. She built her network by making sales calls, developing customers, gaining referrals and acting on them—and repeating that cycle over and over.

Rubber Ducky

AGCD recently executed another interesting mailing, for one of its customers. Several hundred journalists all across the country came to work to find a rubber ducky in their mailboxes. This was part of a campaign to promote Pittsburgh Cultural Trust’s third annual Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts, which featured the first US appearance of the Rubber Duck Project, a creation of Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman. The Rubber Duck Project is a 40 foot tall, 35 foot long, 30 foot wide floating sculpture which has appeared in cities like Hong Kong, Osaka, Sao Paulo and Sydney. It floated on the Allegheny River in Pittsburgh for almost a month during the Festival.

Pittsburgh Cultural Trust called AlphaGraphics when they first started talking about bringing the Rubber Duck Project to Pittsburgh. The mission was to get national coverage for the entire event, essentially promoting the city and the region. So they turned, not to a high-profile ad agency, but to their “quick printer”—except that AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District is much more than that, which they’ve demonstrated in their own advertising and promotion. Having received the coconut mailing, PCT said “We want something with the same kind of impact.”

The Huffington Post even mentioned the rubber ducky mailing in their coverage on the event. “It was not packaged in a box or padded envelope, but simply floated in atop of pile of mail with its destination and sender’s information tied around its neck.” How’s that for impact!

Bottom Line

The bottom line here is that the transition from print provider to Marketing Services Provider is eminently possible. It can be done. It is being done! But it's a two-part process.

The first part is to learn to talk the talk, either individually or organizationally. The second part is to walk the walk, and it only makes sense that the best way to demonstrate that is with your own marketing. AGCD's coconut campaign was undeniably creative, and I should also mention that it was personalized and included a response incentive, so it was both creative *and* strategic.

Now think about the story they have to tell. "We're the people who sent you that coconut, and we also did the 'rubber ducky' campaign for Pittsburgh Cultural Trust. Can we talk about raising your own profile and marketing your own business or organization more effectively?"