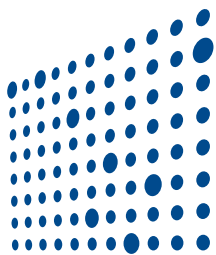


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ALASKA STATE
CHAMBER
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BUSINESS to BUSINESS

Mad Dog Graphx: The faces behind the chamber's new logo

By Christina Holmgren

You may or may not be familiar with Mad Dog Graphx – but if you live in Alaska, you have seen their work.

The Alaska Food Bank, the Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau, Northern Air Cargo – all have fresh, well-designed logos originating in the creative space of Mad Dog Graphx, currently housed right off of Northern Lights Boulevard and Minnesota Drive in midtown Anchorage.

“We love running into our work,” said Michael Ardaiz, owner and half of the creative team at Mad Dog Graphx. Kris Ryan-Clarke, the other half of Mad Dog Graphx, whom Ardaiz describes as “phenomenally good,” recently drove by a sign for the Tatitlek Corp. that had just been put up. Mad Dog designed the logo, but the designers had no idea they would be driving by it on their way to work every morning.

The firm’s design has been described as “art you can use,” and the work of Mad Dog Graphx is just that – created based on research, for a purpose, and like all good art, carrying a meaning and a significance that keeps growing, surprising and amazing.

While Ardaiz and Ryan-Clarke’s creative minds have resulted in many easily identifiable images over time, the name for their studio isn’t one of them. “Mad Dog Graphx” was already named that when Ardaiz got a call asking him if he wanted to buy the budding graphic design business. The former owner had won a full scholarship to an educational institution where he could get his master’s degree, and didn’t want to miss the opportunity.

Ardaiz, not wanting to muddy the waters for the studio’s existing clients, thought he’d keep the name until he came up with something better. But by the time he did, clients protested. They already thought of him as “Mad Dog Graphx,” so Mad Dog it is. So ingrained is the name that clients today bring in funky sculptures of different mad dogs as gifts to the designers.

As a designer, Ardaiz is aware that the identity of a business is of the utmost importance. Having an unusual business name, he said, has worked for and against his own firm.

“We’ve had people tell us they picked us because we had the coolest name, sounded fun, and liked that we would work out-of-the box,” he said. But a large entity, now a client of Mad Dog Graphx’s, told Ardaiz that “we would have called you earlier” except the business name made them like “a bunch of skateboard kids working out of their mom’s garage.”

Ardaiz, born and raised in Anchorage to parents with a background in the aviation industry, spent two years at the University of Alaska Anchorage before going to the University of Arizona at Tucson, where he graduated with a degree in journalism and radio/TV production. He spent several years in TV production before buying Mad Dog Graphx in 1996. Ten years into the two-person design studio’s existence, Mad Dog Graphx has won several awards and has been represented in three design annuals just in 2006. They recently won first place in the American Design Awards, an international design competition, for the 2005 annual report they produced for the Alaska Community Foundation, and a third-place award for the corporate identity package they created for



Mad Dog Graphx is made up of owner Michael Ardaiz (right) and Kris Ryan-Clarke. The firm’s unusual name, inherited when Ardaiz bought the business, has been both a boon and a hurdle at times.

the Anchorage Community Land Trust.

Despite the national – and international – exposure, Ardaiz said most of the studio’s business still originates in Alaska. When they do get calls from Outside, “it’s almost always a surprise,” he said, and usually word-of-mouth from inside Alaska has given their name wings. For example, he said, a call from Maryland and one from Dallas in the same day from people saying they had seen Mad Dog’s work both originated with people who had consulted for the Barrow Alaska Native corporation.

The design studio offers a range of creative and production services, but specializes in corporate, retail and brand identity development, as well as advertising and

Mad Dog: Award-winning designers work with companies of all sizes

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marketing design.

Not every business needs identity development, Ardaiz said. But the more competitive your field of business is, the more important it is to differentiate yourself from your competitors – and an easily identifiable logo can help you do that.

“Since most Alaska businesses work with a very local audience, your customers will be pulled from the same pool as those of your competitors,” he said. “I’m an Alaskan, and a small business owner. I get that when you are small or a start-up operation, you can’t spend a fortune.” That is why Ardaiz’s company charges clients on a floating scale – from larger corporations, to mom-and-pop operations and nonprofits. A small investment can go a long way.

“Some clients start out small, with a logo,” Ardaiz said, and it grows from there. As an example, he mentioned Northern Air Cargo, a company that started out hiring Ardaiz to redesign its logo. NAC, he said, now has an entire display case of clothes and gear for its employees. “It’s free advertising, and a great way to build a brand,” he said.

A well-designed logo used well – publicly and consistently – is a good marketing tool. But a good logo doesn’t come out of the clipart that came with your computer with your business name slapped on top. A professional designer will work with a client and research the field of business before getting down to creating. A good example is the process Mad Dog Graphx went through working with the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce on its new logo.

An involved process

“We met with the staff and the executive committee,” Ardaiz said. He worked with the chamber’s board chair, Eric Britten, and president Wayne Stevens throughout the process. Ardaiz first asked what the chamber felt was the strengths and weaknesses of the existing logo, and then did an independent audit to figure out what others saw as strengths and weaknesses.

Identifying the target audience as “international, really” and adhering to the instructions from and wishes

of the chamber – a logo that’s a notch above the local chambers as well as commerce and industry, and can last for 20 years – he proceeded to studying logos of other chambers worldwide. Wanting a logo that identified the chamber as a less “folksy” and a more technical/industrial-based entity, the chamber also instructed Ardaiz to not, under any circumstances, use stars.

“Stars are basically shorthand for a successful entity,” Ardaiz said, “but the chamber wanted something more cutting-edge.”

The result is a strong and professional logo that brings Alaska to mind – but also evokes charts and graphs, circuit boards and networking. One person, seeing the logo for the first time, identified the pattern as “the smaller and larger businesses of the state working together in unity to create something stronger and bigger than the sum of its parts. And it looks like a door being opened to the future.”

“The pattern within the grid is subtle,” chamber president Stevens said. “Our favorite reaction to the mark comes when a viewer first recognizes the familiar crest it forms.”

The new chamber logo also works well because the pattern gets stronger as the logo gets smaller; it works well with or without the words identifying it, and in a vertical pattern, the graphics with the words create an exclamation point.

What’s next for Mad Dog Graphx

“We don’t want to be huge,” Ardaiz said. “The market base is just too small.” But he also admits that being “an absolute control freak” would make him reluctant to expand to the point of losing creative control anyway. A possibility, he said, would be expanding by hiring a small pool of associate designers who could be managed by himself and Ryan-Clarke in shifts, actually allowing each of them in turn to take vacations. Or, he said, “take a lap top with a Wi-Fi connection to the beach.”

But to do that, Ardaiz would first like his own building. “Something that’s all Mad Dog.”

“And right now, we’re preparing entries into a new round of awards,” Ardaiz said. The state chamber logo



The Alaska State Chamber of Commerce’s new logo, designed by Mad Dog Graphx, incorporates elements of the former logo in a more modern format.

will be one of them. So keep your fingers crossed, and prepare to hear more good news. New awards would not only mean another feather in the cap for this small, successful Anchorage design studio – it would also give the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce even more worldwide exposure.

Christine Holmgren is a writer and Web designer who has lived in Alaska for nine years. She is currently based in Anchorage.