

Graphic Design

The face of Alaska businesses

By Tasha Anderson

Note: This is part one of a three part series exploring the graphic design industry in Alaska.

It was in college during a senior seminar that it first occurred to me that someone wrote the text on a bleach bottle. Not only was it written—instead of, say, spontaneously manifesting—it was written, vetted, edited, reviewed, approved, and then probably tweaked again. And what I really understood in that moment was not that there was too much investment into a simple label, but that the label of a bottle sold worldwide to who knows how many billions of people each year is no simple thing.

Alaska businesses take their message to the Alaska, national, and international business communities just as seriously. For most companies, the most basic symbol of what they are and what they do is a name and a graphic: a logo. Simple, right?

Visual Conduit

In terms of logo design, “I feel designers are the visual conduit between [a company’s] mission statement and the visual voice or message that they want to convey to their audience,” says Annie Brace, owner of Corso Graphics. And that can be difficult since clients don’t always know what they want their logo to say or perhaps don’t know how to articulate that message in a visual form. Brace continues, “Sometimes a client gives you the kitchen sink in terms of what they want in their logo ... and it’s your job to take that information and meld

Annie Brace of Corso Graphics designed this logo for Arctic Moon Bakery located in Anchorage.

Courtesy of Corso Graphics



Courtesy of Mad Dog Graphx

Mad Dog Graphx created a series of holiday-themed cards with punch-out ornaments for The Salmon Project.

it together to create a mark that captures the personality and message of that company in a clear and concise way.”

She says the process isn’t always easy, but her job is to pare it down and deliver a product that her client will love and recognize as representing their goals.

On the other hand, Mike Kirkpatrick, owner of Screamin’ Yeti Designs, says sometimes clients don’t provide any guidance at all, and while the freedom to be totally creative can be positive, it also has its risks. “Sometimes I get creative ideas, but I’m headed south and their ideas are headed north,” Kirkpatrick says. “Even a little inkling of a direction or an idea—it can be a sketch on a bar napkin or a stick figure or just the logo of another business” can keep the creative process on track. “I just need a baseline, and then I can go from there.”

It’s very possible for a good design to not be the right design for a given company, and sometimes a great idea isn’t the right idea for a proj-

ect, which can be frustrating, Kirkpatrick says. “Sometimes you can be working on an awesome project and the creativity’s just not clicking, the mind’s just blank. ... And then you’re working on forms and you’ll get all kinds of great ideas.”

Michael Ardaiz, owner of Mad Dog Graphx, says no matter the deliverable, it could probably benefit from a little professional design. “I think that graphic design is an integral part of any business. Whether you realize it or not, every communication that your company releases is designed. It’s a matter of, is it designed by you in [Microsoft] Word or is it going to be designed by somebody with expertise in design?” Depending on the piece, a template downloaded online and populated with clip art may be entirely appropriate; for most materials leaving a business, it’s probably better to consult an in-house professional if available or consult with an outside resource.

Alaska Centric

When it comes to developing new logos, Alaskans love Alaska, and Ardaiz says sometimes he finds it necessary to steer clients away from a logo awash with iconic Alaska images. “You don’t have to Alaska it up; we already know where we are. ... Instead, [use] something that differentiates you in the market, rather than makes you look like a part of somebody else’s team.”

In particular, he often guides clients away from using the outline of the state of Alaska. “You don’t want to look like you’re a paid state agency,” he says. “Every state agency has that: do you want to look like you need paying clients or do you want to look like your bills are paid by Juneau?” The problem with the state of Alaska outline is further compounded by how complicated the shape is. “As beautiful as it is, and as distinctive as it is, it’s really hard to work into a standard shape. God help you if you want to



Courtesy of Screamin' Yeti

Mike Kirkpatrick of Screamin' Yeti designed these logos, from left to right, for TapRoot, Hearth Artisan Pizza, and Uptown Athletic in Anchorage and DeBorde Agri-Management in Oregon.

make it into a lapel pin or a square sign for your building. You're going to have to chop Southeast or the Aleutians or simplify something, and then you have offended entire groups of people. There's no way around that," Ardaiz says.

Brand Development

David Taylor is the Creative Director for Element Agency, and he says he started his graphic design career with a knack in logo design. "That's what I loved to do; I loved to create these very simple symbols that represented these ideas." Taylor says Element is a brand development company, an extension of that passion. Brand development starts with name and logo design, what he calls the brand identity, and then "bleed[s] out from there to color palettes, typefaces, and graphic elements to create essentially a personality."

Taylor says that often when Element presents a new logo to clients, their first reaction is: What does it mean? "It's so fascinating." But, he says, "a new symbol doesn't mean anything," explaining that as people have experiences with a symbol it takes on meaning, and that process—bringing meaning to a symbol—is brand development.

The danger, of course, is that negative meaning can be attached to a logo or brand. "If that happens on a scale large enough, a company needs to rebrand because their symbol has become toxic," Taylor says.

Of course many companies refresh their brand not because it's become toxic but to keep the company modern and up to date. Spawn Ideas Associate Creative Director Amanda Strickland gives the example of Pepsi. "If you look at their logo over the past forty years, it has morphed probably at least ten, twelve times. And I would bet you most consumers never even noticed the difference, so they're just tweaking it to be a little more fresh, a little more now."

Strickland also gives a more local example in GCI, which has been a Spawn client for the last three years, presenting Strickland with the challenge of designing for a client that already has a history of company branding. "That is the fun part to me," Strickland says, speaking of the need to think creatively within guidelines. "I love that there's something set already, and how do we move around within that box, so to speak."

She continues, "So it's our job as an agency to keep pushing them forward to doing something a little different." One such change was introducing a new color, glacier blue, into GCI's brand. In Taylor's example of a toxic brand, it may be best to dump old branding and start anew, but Strickland says that for many companies starting brand new

may not be the best approach. "It's a little bit harsh when [companies] go from one logo to something completely different, so evolution is exactly what we do," she says. Another perk of gradual changes is that it gives a company time to determine if a new campaign is successful, what's successful about it, and how to use that success to move forward positively.

Ardaiz of Mad Dog Graphx says that he's noticed a trend in logo design of designing with an eye toward longevity, which he sees as positive. While it works occasionally for a company to use a logo developed in the '60s or '70s, often "it looks like someone drew a building in 1963 and nobody has thought about it since," he says.

Vital Design

Strickland says, "Why I love this business is the fact that there is strategy behind what we do." While graphic design can certainly be art, there's a difference, she says, between what an artist and

a graphic designer do and their purpose in doing it. "How do you make someone react to what you're doing, and not just in an emotional way, but to actually have a call to action?" she says.

A business's personality is established through a logo and branding, and Strickland loves how graphic design gives business a face and a personality.

"Graphic design is the foundational skill, it's the foundational language of everything we do," says Element's Taylor. A logo, a brand, a media campaign, isn't much without art and design. "It's nothing, in fact," Taylor says.

Ardaiz says, "There's a segment of business that doesn't address graphic design as a resource—they're not interested or they feel it's not important—and I would take the position that they are missing the boat." ⚙️

Tasha Anderson is an Associate Editor for Alaska Business.

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