

On putting yourself out there

Interview Louise Lawton

Too busy working on client identities to tend to your own? More at home in the studio than in sales, Gideon Keith is director of Auckland design agency Seven, one of those creative firms that see value in taking on a business development manager.

Q. How do you present Seven to the market?

A. Until a few years ago you could use words like organic or haphazard. But as we've grown we've had to make a more concerted effort in managing our own image. I think the biggest problem we've got is defining what we are. We work in three mediums (print/web/motion) and offer those at three different depths of process (style/communication/brand), so when people ask, "What is Seven?" there is no short, easy answer. We're currently defining ourselves as a design agency, but that is still quite limiting.

Q. Is it hard to determine your agency 'point of difference'?

A. Yes and no. I think our approach and culture is our point of difference and that is realised in our work and reputation. So that should come across in our external communications, but how we articulate it isn't always clear. The old analogy of the panel beater's car comes to mind: they spend all day fixing other peoples' cars and tend to neglect their own or put it in the 'too hard basket'. If I was to mark our current sales communications, it would be: "C- must try harder". But we are working on overhauling everything at the moment including our website...

Q. When building your own agency online portfolio, does the client influence the end result?

A. Hmm. The client? Self promotion and self-commissioned work have a tendency to get muddled in our studio. The opportunity to write our own brief and play client means that we push the boundaries a lot further than we possibly should and there's a tendency to forget the primary target of our communications – our clients. That said, our current website is average because we erred on the self-promo side and forgot the self-commissioned side that had made our previous website so popular. Our new and improved version is under construction and I believe we've got the balance right this time.

Q. How about new business development, then?

A. New business development: it sounds so grown up and businesslike. Over the past few years it's been myself working on that here and Australia and Brett Voris working in the 'States. Locally it's had mixed results as my heart is in the studio and not in sales. We've just gone through the process of hiring a BDM, through Portfolio of course, and it's been a learning process. But we've ended up with a great new addition, Lyndsay Davenport.

At the end of the day, without sales there is no business and I got frustrated with seeing large accounts and great briefs going to companies with great sales people but awful, unimaginative studios (you know who you are). After 11 years we have the creative talent, management and processes sorted but historically lacked the sales prowess. Now that we've got Lyndsay, watch out!

Q. Pitch process – can cost lots if not successful – your thoughts?

A. Creative pitches are a waste of our industry's output. And while I resent being asked to work for free, I know that they are a fact of life so we have done maybe half a dozen in the last 11 years and only then with very qualified leads.

My stock response to clients' or prospects' requests for creative pitches is: "In the long run, the company that wins the business will do free pitches for other companies and you will pay for them". It's all about trust and relationships, I tell clients who are interviewing for a new agency/studio to go with the people who you get on with.

Q. How do you decide what pro bono work you will undertake?

A. I'm a little embarrassed to say that we don't do any. We have in the past and we've found that there is a direct correlation to the amount paid and the value perceived by the client. But never say never, and if there is a valid pro bono client out there, we're always willing to listen – but only if you're willing to let us do our job.

Q. Your thoughts on traditional design companies now doing web?

A. Not speaking for anyone else of course, but it's been a long learning curve for us and our clients. The medium itself has undergone frantic change since its inception and is now starting to find its feet.

Good design is good design regardless of the medium and if you are a graphic designer you should be able to realise your work on screen, in print, everywhere; and there has been a reticence by design companies to get their hands dirty in web. It's a great medium and the future of communications (but not, as predicted, the end of print). pd

Louise Lawton is a consultant at Portfolio Recruitment in Auckland.
e. Louise@portfoliorecruit.co.nz
www.portfoliorecruit.co.nz