

Decorate for Success: Branding Your Office Space

Extracted from Cheryl Hall's article in the *Dallas Morning News*, "Principals of MasonBaronet, Branded Spaces help clients thoroughly convey image"

Branding. It's the hottest word in business today. In a world of competitive clutter and hazy identity, smart companies constantly bombard us with subliminal messages about who they are, what they do and the culture they nurture.

Web sites, once utilitarian tools for data and perfunctory ordering, are snazzy storefronts intended to dazzle and influence customers and potential employees.

Office space, once as static as the pinstripe suit, is being designed to make vibrant cultural statements. For example, the large model airplanes hanging in Southwest Airlines' lobby – and the peanut packs at the security check-in – immediately give you the sense that this is a colorful and playful company.

Holly Mason, the 34-year-old principal of Dallas-based MasonBaronet Inc., knows how to build brand awareness through Web sites, interactive media, advertising and marketing materials.

And Jane Mills, 47, principal of Branded Spaces Co., helps companies create interior DNA from the moment customers cross the threshold.

Now they've married their expertise to make sure a client's virtual and physical personalities are one.

"We're trying to define our client's image through the whole package," says Ms. Mills, who's been practicing spatial branding for 20 years. "Early on, I felt a strong connection between advertising, graphic design and interiors. I'd been looking for a partner who could help me carry that through."

Actually, Ms. Mason's new offices in the Landmark Building on North Lamar Street were the duo's beta test.

Two years ago, Ms. Mason was buying out her partner, Willy Baronet, rebranding the agency and moving into the historic West End building. "I had the luxury of doing everything at once so it was all cohesive," she says.

There are all sorts of subtleties that bind her agency's image.

"On our Web site, we use big type," Ms. Mason says. "When you walk into our space, you see large words that reflect our friendly personality. 'Hi' is in our lobby. 'Breathe' is on the wall where our art directors are designing. [If you know the advertising business, you know that's very important to do.] 'Think' is outside of our think tank where we do our brainstorming. 'Yum' is in our kitchen."

The offices are pristine white with accents of lime green and orange. Even the coasters, desk nameplates, and jelly beans and apples are color-coordinated green.

"It's very important to create an environment that inspires creativity and helps us recruit and retain top design talent," Ms. Mason says.

Theater

Ms. Mills incorporated some furnishings from the agency's old offices. She splurged on items such as expensive office chairs, but went on the cheap with others – like the \$25 light fixtures from Ikea.

Since then, the duo has worked on a half-dozen projects, including one for the law firm Sayles Werbner, which was branded "Masters of the Courtroom."

Its Web site, marketing materials and office space in downtown's Renaissance Tower all have an edgy, modern texture.

The tagline is pretty bold for a law firm. But Dick Sayles says it isn't bragging if it's true.

"MasonBaronet and Branded Spaces captured our unique spirit and conveyed it consistently and creatively in our marketing materials, our office environment and even the way we speak to anyone who is interested in what we do."

Ms. Mason says that "every touch point creates a brand experience."

"So many times, professional services and businesses don't think of their space like a Starbucks or a Target would," she said. "It's a theater for creating pride and brand loyalty for both customers and employees. It's a way to demonstrate the kind of service you can expect. It helps to justify your fees."

Decorating for success

So you can charge more if you have cool offices?

Yes, Ms. Mills says. Consider it the company version of dressing for success. "You appear to your client that you're more substantial, legitimate and sophisticated. You're displaying that you understand your business."

Perhaps their most challenging project was trying to make a concrete pipe company come to life on its Web site and its corporate facilities.

"It's hard to make concrete pipe sexy," Ms. Mason says.

Ms. Mills used artsy photographs of pipe in the company's construction yard to convey that this was not your typical commodity company.

Ken Salyer Jr., owner of Tri-Kes Wallcovering Source, wants his office space to be as hip and fashionable as the Web site MasonBaronet recently designed – not that any of his high-end architectural and interior design clients would ever see his corporate digs.

"Our sales force goes into the Trisha Wilson-type offices of the world," Mr. Salyer says. "We have beautiful graphics on all of our binders and our products that we put forth to our customers. But if you came to our [current] offices you'd say, 'Wow, is this the same company that put all those creative products out?' "

And he's not saying "wow" in a wonderful way.

"We need our space to reflect more of what our public image is so we can attract and retain the right type of team members."

So instead of typical workstations and conference tables, Ms. Mills created a flexible design studio that can handle training, customer service, a product showroom and hospitality suite.

"We've created a teaming environment," Ms. Mills says. "Appearance counts, absolutely, not just with your customer but in-house. I can't stress that enough."

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