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OAKLAND BUSINESS REVIEW

Innovators: When creativity and serendipity collide

Thursday, February 8, 2007

Susan Murphy has been an entrepreneur and innovator for nearly three decades with a diverse portfolio that includes promotions for nightclubs and restaurants, brand identities and award-winning interiors.

The owner of iContact Designs Inc., a full-service interior design firm in Pleasant Ridge, Murphy has maintained an interest in several businesses. Those include CircleBrands.com, a brand identity consulting firm that offers pre-packaged concepts, and an advertising company, Lip Service Communications.

Murphy was hired to publicize the grand openings of several area nightclubs and restaurants including the Gem Theatre, the State Theatre and the Metro Music Café in the late 1980s. On another front, iContact Designs was awarded a 2005 Detroit Home Magazine Design Award for the interior design of a lower-level game room and her work will be featured later this year in a Taunton Press book titled, "Basement Ideas that Work."

The Royal Oak resident is a partner on all her business projects with husband William Pilipchuk. Murphy recently discussed her many business ventures and how she views the regional market with freelance writer Mike Scott.

Q.: Briefly explain the various business ventures you are currently involved in.

A.: My entrepreneurial journey began with Lip Service Communications in 1987. Our CircleBrands division was established in 2000 to sell our comprehensive, proprietary brand-identity packages, many that were created before a bona fide client existed, and all which were derived from our motto, "An idea is a terrible thing to waste."

Among our numerous intellectual properties, we've created a brand-identity package that offers CPA firms a succinct and memorable unique selling proposition by way of a registered trademark and tagline for We Do The Math, a toll-free vanity number, 1-800-CPA-MATH, and all the corresponding Internet domains.

We added another design arm, iContact Designs Inc., to our roster in 1996 to further our passion for interior design. We wear many hats and feel at home in all of them. Our designs for the residential market are an extension of that spirit and the embodiment of feeling at home."

Q.: Has the sluggish local economy had any direct impact on your

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businesses?

A.: As an integrated design agency, we are fortunate to have two congruent businesses that allow us to ride out the peaks and valleys typical of most businesses. From our experience, there will always be people who want beautiful homes that comfort and delight them and businesses who need an unforgettable and distinctive brand identity that resonate with the consumer.

Q.: Given your extensive branding experience, how critical is brand identity for a small to mid-sized business. How do you define brand identity?

A.: "Brand and deliver" is likely to be the rallying cry of this decade. Branding is not an option; it's a necessity for any size business.

Many fine books have been published on branding, but one of my favorites is "Primal Branding," by Patrick Hanlon. It translates everything into meaningful actions that anyone can follow to engage consumers emotionally.

As for my definition, in the simplest terms, I think brand identity is when a symbol, service/product and emotion become synonymous with your company.

Q.: What are the factors to consider when developing a start-up business?

A.: Don't start a business you're not passionate about. Passion is the fuel that runs the person that runs the business. Also, one of the simplest things but one most likely to be disregarded by business owners is the appearance of their place of business. If you have a storefront, office or workspace, make sure it welcomes customers. If your budget doesn't allow you to be sensational, at least be clean and neat.

Q.: How has the interior design industry changed over the years?

A.: The interior design profession has experienced exponential growth over the past 10 years. That growth has been spurred on by the public's increased awareness of the interior design profession through the advent of cable channels like HGTV and home makeover programs.

Many homeowners are now actively seeking the aid of an interior designer to help with everything from architectural embellishments to space planning and accessorizing.

Q.: What is your advice for business owners who desire added publicity?

A.: Every business has something to offer that's unique or compelling or topical. Determine what that is and don't be afraid to let everyone know. Many people shy away from blowing their own horn. My advice to them is what Lauren Bacall said to Humphrey Bogart in "To Have and Have Not": "Put your lips together and blow."

Q.: Explain how you went from working with Billy Squire and Foreigner to designing upscale homes? How have you been able to jump from one industry to another?

A.: My path has been a circuitous design odyssey, full of serendipity. I have an abundance of creative energy that delights in anything related to the arts, so my transition from working with bands to developing brands to interior design is really a natural progression. Our companies are the perfect marriage of artistry and creativity.

Mary Lowe covers professional services for Oakland Business Review.

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