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Fixing the shoes of the cobbler's children

Many firms admit to neglecting their own PR in favor of their clients'. Hamilton Nolan looks at ways of making sure that even the first impression is the right one.

The tactics used by PR agencies to market themselves are as diverse as the collections of minds at the agencies themselves. But one constant is the boilerplate, that short, tightly written copy that pops up on the front of web pages and the bottom of press releases, designed to sum up an agency's expertise and extol its virtues, all in the space of a few words or sentences.

Whether it has any impact is another story.

Peppercom cofounder and managing partner Steve Cody is one agency head who has put a lot of thought into the boilerplate. He says that, as his agency's capabilities expanded, he felt the need to emphasize what he says was its unique understanding of its clients' business. The firm now sports the slogan: "A distinctly different communication firm with a distinctly different approach."

"We weren't plain vanilla; we weren't bread and butter," he says. "We have a group of firms that we benchmark against...and there were very few, if any, that I recall when we came up with the positioning line two years ago that even ventured into understanding...a client's business."

Peppercom also has tried to play up the "difference" angle in its advertising. Cody says that, while a slogan alone cannot make an agency—more important is the work itself—its tagline does serve as a hook to draw in potential clients, who ask him exactly what it means. When he explains that it involves "understanding your pain, your word," one of two things happen: "Either we immediately connect with a client," he says, "or we are completely dropped out of the conversation because all they want is media relations."

That all-too-familiar adage "the cobbler's children have no shoes" has sunk in for many firms. They market themselves just as their clients do and base much of their own campaigns on the ideas that their boilerplates strive to embody.

The Washington, DC-based SheaHedges Group (SHG) is a prime example, with an in-house marketing team on the task full-time.

SHG cofounder and principal Kristi Hedges says that the development of the agency's boilerplate, including website design and the slogan, "Get out there," involved brainstorming sessions, as well as input from contacts in the tech sector that make up its main client base. "We wanted to talk in the language of our customers," she says. "That to me is one of the principles of persuasion: You have to talk in the language of the person that you're trying to reach. And you can't be verbose when you have a customer base that likes to be very direct and to the point."

In fact, boilerplate materials might be more important for tech-focused firms that for any others. The key reasons for this are the relatively greater tendency of clients to judge a firm on its web materials and the importance of search engines like Google in driving potential customers to a particular firm.

At M/C/C, an integrated tech communication firm in Dallas, an ongoing internal rebranding process has revealed that the agency had a lot of work to do in order to position itself effectively to gain new business.

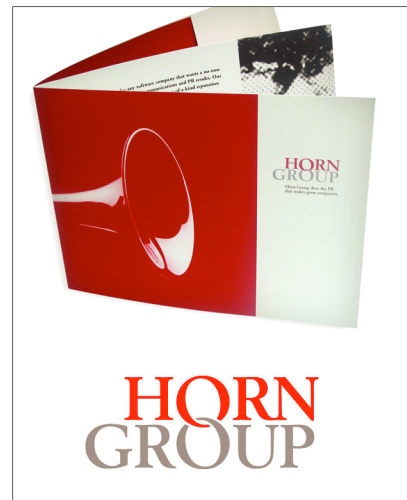
"Two months ago, if you did a search for 'technology PR'...we were buried, even though we're the only one [in Dallas]," says Michelle Owens, an M/C/C account coordinator.

The agency turned to an outside firm to help with its search engine optimization (SEO). It discovered that the firm had been hurting itself by filling its marketing materials with descriptions of each specific service, as well as with vague terms like "cyberactive," instead of focusing on phrases that bluntly describe what it does, such as, "Where technology lives."

"Everything now is about the key words, and we've had to get rid of all the jargon," Owens says.

Staying high on Google's list also requires frequent site updates, which means changing the short copy material while maintaining its central message. Owens admits that the process has been a challenge, but says it has allowed M/C/C to discover "who we're perceived as, rather than who we perceive ourselves to be."

Other agencies turn to outside branding experts to guide them along the path to marketing materials that they believe their



true essence. The Horn Group, a tech-focused agency based in San Francisco, partnered with Philippe Becker Design (PBD) to redefine themselves. "Our branding was really safe and really pretty," says Horn Group partner Shannon Latta, "and that's not what we're about."

PBD conducted an intensive analysis of the agency's goals and business landscape before initiating the rebranding process. The branding specialists focused primarily on design, while the agency itself handled most of the copy and positioning work. But PBD president David Becker says that a boilerplate is a vital element in a successful rebranding. "The more succinct, tight, and repetitive you can be about what your messages are, the better," he says. "That really means consistency in how you represent the DNA of your company."

But at the end of the day, does anyone besides you remember your boilerplate? To find out, PRWeek conducted a wholly unscientific survey of the magazine's editorial team, as well as several people interviewed for this article. They were given a list of about 10 boilerplate slogans from the largest PR firms in America and were asked to name the firms.

The results were, to put it mildly, disappointing. No one could name more than a third of the agencies, and many scored a perfect zero. The lesson, perhaps, is to let your boilerplate speak for your agency, but let your agency speak for itself.