

Brand News

There's more to marketing than print advertising, and today's kitchen and bath dealers are finding innovative ways to strengthen their brands.

BY ANITA SHAW

The majority would agree that it takes both great products/services and a great marketing/sales strategy for kitchen and bath dealers and designers to stay competitive. And while most choose to market their products and services in typical fashion, those who use a creative branding strategy are much more likely to meet with continued success.

Indeed, discovering different ways to distinguish products and services can mean the difference between just getting by and optimum growth.

"It's about cutting through the clutter as much as anything else," remarks Melissa Galt, principal of Melissa Galt Inc. in Atlanta, GA.

Galt, who is the great-granddaughter of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, encourages designers to learn how to talk about themselves and what they do.

"You have to create taglines. As a brand, you need to come up with what you do in a way that gets people to talk about it," she advises. "When I'm in a networking group, I say, 'I make people's interior visions a reality today.'"

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

One way dealers and designers get their names out in front of potential customers is by offering



educational opportunities. There's a lot to learn about kitchen and bath renovation, and many firms want to teach what they know to their clients.

"You probably have a better client when the person knows what the alternatives are," explains Richard Drewry, owner of Kitchen & Bath Experts in San Diego, CA. "San Diego has a lot of cabinet shops, and there are environmental laws in California that dictate the types of [permitted cabinet] finishes. Being able to explain those things in a seminar is really beneficial to us and to the client."

"We partner with the continuing education programs in four different surrounding communities,"

notes Lorey Cavanaugh, CKD, CBD, owner of Kitchen & Bath Design Consultants LLC in West Hartford, CT. "They advertise on our behalf, and we offer seminars during the spring and fall on kitchen and bath planning, guidelines and trends."

This program, she says, offers people a chance to see the firm's showroom and the work of its designers, and "they can have a conversation with a live person, which is certainly more effective in establishing contacts than a print ad."

Drewry agrees: "Customers can spend an hour and a half and get to know one of our designers, and decide if this is something that they want to do."

Showrooms can also host cook-

ing demos and participatory events.

Clarke, with locations in Milford, MA and South Norwalk, CT, promises visitors an experience they can't get anywhere else, notes Rick Swanson, the firm's director of marketing. "People are welcome to test drive our appliances – cook their own recipes, have us cook for them or be part of a cooking demo with a group of people. Our whole campaign is based on the idea that Clarke appliance showrooms are playgrounds for adults."

In fact, the Milford location is planning a series of grilling demos this month in its outdoor patio area to attract people. "One session will focus on grilling appetizers, another on pizzas and bread, and a third one on fruits and vegetables," reports Swanson.

Clarke also offers cooking demos done by the showroom's consultants once a month. "None of them are chefs, but they are all homeowners, so it demystifies the appliances," he contends.

Providing educational opportunities beyond the showroom walls was a way for Galt to gain some valuable exposure. She taught evening adult classes in Birmingham, AL during her apprenticeship, and continued when she began her own firm in Atlanta.

"I taught design to people who



Dubbed 'Not Your Neighbor's Craftsman' by the design team at Mosaik Design in Portland, OR, this kitchen incorporates a range of sustainable materials – in keeping with the company's interest in green design.

Photos: Jon Jensen

were interested in the profession and interested in dabbling at it in their own homes," she explains. Though she only planned to teach for a couple of years, her teaching experience at Emory University, Oglethorpe University and the Spruill Arts Center lasted for 10 years due to her love of the classroom experience.

Galt says the exposure from her two-line bio in the schools' catalogs was "such a marketing boon," as were the courses themselves. "People would know my name, even if they couldn't place it right away."

Through teaching, Galt reports that her client base grew. "[In class] you had a feel for how I operated and what my personality was like. It's a great way to let people know you."

MEDIA BLITZ

In addition to education, reaching out via different forms of media can help strengthen a brand name.

"I've written articles for the local Home Builders Association newsletter, and also for different magazines," comments Susan Bloss, principal of Lifestyle Kitchen Studio, in East Grand Rapids, MI.

For those contemplating this avenue, Galt recommends thinking beyond the trade. "Years ago, I published an article titled 'Making Your House a Home' in *Atlanta*

Singles Magazine," she recalls. "Members of this audience weren't necessarily going to pick up a lot of design magazines, but they still saw an article [on home] design."

Galt is now submitting articles to online publications. She believes in the power of the Web, and notes that three of her largest jobs came via her Web site.

Cavanaugh stays in touch with her clients via a "very high quality newsletter... We send it to people who have done business or had contact with us in the past. The newsletter helps us stay fresh in their minds."

Clarke is currently "looking at direct mail in a whole fresh fashion," reveals Swanson. The firm draws its leads from people who visit the showroom, as well as from those who visit the Web sites of the appliance brands it carries.

Swanson notes that Clarke is now considering a targeted marketing program for hot prospects.

Many designers are also taking to the airwaves as a means to get their message out to the public, but not with the traditional 30- and 60-second radio ad spots.

For the past decade, Michael Lanari, owner of Kitchen & Bath Concepts in Little Rock, AR, has been on the radio every Saturday morning as the host of "The

Kitchen and Bath Idea Show." Known as the KitchenMan, Lanari takes calls from listeners who want to discuss kitchen, bath, remodeling and D-I-Y issues.

His radio show has a loyal following, with 55,000 reported listeners each week. That has translated into significant sales for his company. "Within weeks of beginning the show, we had people coming into the showroom looking for the 'KitchenMan,'" he remarks.

Cavanaugh was invited to be on a radio talk show program earlier this year, and parlayed it into a 13-week stint. "The host wanted to do a special program on kitchens and baths, so she called to ask if I was interested," she comments. Cavanaugh wrote a 13-week program that covered all of the basic steps, including how to be an effective client, choosing cabinets, countertops and hardware, and how to pick a contractor.

Lanari has also used television to further his brand. Five years ago, he designed a live kitchen set for the then new program "Good Morning Arkansas."

"The producer heard I like to cook and asked me to be a guest cook on one of the first few episodes," he says. "I'm now one of the resident chefs appearing every other Wednesday," in a segment called "Cooking with the KitchenMan."

"In the last 20 years, I've never found any other type of marketing that has had the kind of impact that these two shows have had," reflects Lanari. "More than 90 percent of those who walk [into] our showroom know us from those shows."

The Clarke's Milford showroom also hosts to a TV show called "Simply Ming." Ming Tsai, the executive chef and owner of Blue Ginger restaurant, is the star of the show, and he endorses the showroom's products when he cooks on them, explains Swanson.

Clarke also owns a TV property called "New England Living," which is shot in different homes throughout New England. "It's kind of a combination of lifestyle, travel and wonderful kitchens," Swanson explains. He notes that Clarke is the principal sponsor and producer of the show, and it sells sponsorships to its partners.

FOCUSING IN

Many designers have also set themselves apart by focusing on

specialty areas.

For instance, Bloss has long been interested in Universal Design, but that interest became keen when she ended up paralyzed as the result of a mosquito bite. After attending a National Kitchen & Bath Association presentation about Certified Aging in Place Specialists (CAPS), she signed up for the certification, along with two of her co-workers.

During her time as an inpatient and outpatient at the local rehabilitation hospital, Bloss designed the facility's new outpatient kitchen. "By using the kitchen, people with disabilities can get used to working in the environments that they will live in," she offers. They also learn about Universal Design, and the design group behind the kitchen.

Lifestyle Kitchen Studio has just installed its first accessible display into its showroom, and receives referrals from other design firms when clients need Universal Design.

NKBA classes were also an inspiration for Becky Bilyeu, owner of Lasting Impressions Home Remodel Center in Florissant, MO. Her firm markets Universal Design as a part of its services. "It was a market that needed attention, and it's underserved," she notes.

Lasting Impressions installed its first Universally Designed kitchen five years ago, and is currently completing a second display.

The firm is also extremely active in marketing Universal Design. "We attended the Assisted Technology Fair, which deals with all things accessible," she says. The firm's designers have also been guest speakers at different meetings that promote safety around the home. "We've gone to hospitals and given talks to stroke patients, to senior group meetings, and we've attended Universal Design summits and the Missouri Occupational Therapy Association conference," she adds.

Bilyeu is very excited about the firm's first Accessible Kooking With Kids open-house event, to be held this month at the showroom. "It promotes children in the home cooking environment," she offers.

The firm is planning two more reservation-only events like this later this year. "Our goal is to intermingle children on wheels [and] not on wheels so they don't feel alienated or different," she explains.

Mosaik Design is less aggressive in its promotion of one of its