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A clearinghouse for design talent



PBN PHOTO / MATTHEW HEALEY

JOSH SILVERMAN, owner of and 'minister of perspective' at Schwadesign, says working with a wide range of independent designers gives the firm the ability to take on projects of any size. Above, he sits in front of the firm's 'wall of vernacular.'

By Natalie Myers
PBN Staff Writer
Posted 10/1/07

What makes Schwadesign's business model unique is the way it mines talent from not one designer, not two, but from a consortium of well-vetted independent designers to meet clients' needs.

Founder and principal Josh Silverman conceived the model while working for both large and small design firms in Boston after graduating with a media studies degree from Ithaca College in 1995.

Silverman wasn't thrilled by how smaller firms couldn't work on very large projects without collaborating with other small firms. And he wasn't thrilled with the hierarchy of larger firms, where lower-ranking designers were limited to one or two tasks for a project.

"There wasn't this flexibility that was required by the ebb and flow of the projects," he said. "I wanted to collaborate with multiple people to bring in the best talent to each different project."

Doing so allows Schwadesign to handle projects small to large because the firm can, at any given time, assemble a project team of one to 16 or more to solve a client's business identity problem, business strategy problem or budget problem through design.

"My role is listening to what clients aren't saying," Silverman said. "Listening to what they really want behind what they think they want and translating that into either a business strategy solution or a draft design solution or a re-branding solution or a re-messaging solution."

The firm's clients span across all industries, ranging from individual visual artists to multinational software companies, some of which have been clients for multiple years.

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Schwadesign's work with Massachusetts-based Ounce Labs, for example, started with designing a pocket folder in 2003. Since then, the firm has completed 81 projects for the company, including a complete re-brand, a 200-page Web site, multiple trade show booths and various print and packaging materials.

"It's to the point where we're suggesting [systems] to clients and they're listening to us because we are so familiar with their work," Silverman said. "We are creating artifacts with them instead of them coming to us and saying, 'Please do this.'"

And having 16 independent designers in multiple locations – including Boston, Brooklyn, Orlando, Fla., San Francisco and Portland, Ore. – brings in referrals, because through their networks they will bring the work to the studio.

"That's one of the strategic advantages," Silverman said. "That has happened numerous times now."

The designer gets a commission, he said, and the opportunity to lead the project team organized by Amy Bernhardt, project manager at Schwadesign.

And having many minds to pull from gives each project a unique look tailored to the client, Silverman said, which is important in the world of re-branding and strategic positioning, especially for clients in the same field.

In addition, each designer has a title that names him or her the "minister" of a key aspect of the project. Silverman, for example, is "minister of perspective," and Jeremy Withers, another core designer, is "minister of dialogue." Most of the designers/ministers have their own clients, in addition to Schwadesign clients.

But Bernhardt is the backbone of the firm, Silverman said. He hired her 14 months ago after determining the influx of new projects needed a central manager.

"We have about 80 concurrent projects," he said, adding that it is twice as many as in previous years. "This past year there has been extraordinary growth."

And the firm's bottom line has increased 300 percent to 800 percent over last year, depending on the week, he said.

Silverman attributes the growth to a "buzz" about the firm, which has been growing locally through the creation of a local chapter of AIGA, the professional association for design, which Silverman founded and heads.

He also attributes the firm's growth to contacts at the R.I. Economic Development Corporation, through which Schwadesign became the agency of record for the Business Innovation Factory and BIF annual summits. The experience has given the firm a high level of exposure in Rhode Island.

"We're beginning to be known locally as a great cost alternative and a very talented one," Silverman said, adding that because the firm doesn't have the overhead of employing full-time designers, it can pass the savings to clients.

"I think that we have the resources that we need right now to grow a lot more," he said. •

Company Profile: Schwadesign

Owner: Josh Silverman

Type of business: Design firm specializing in branding, identity, print, packaging, signage and environments

Location: 558 Mineral Spring Ave., Studio 202, Pawtucket

Employees: 3 (including owner)

Year established: 1997

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