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A Gift That Keeps on Giving

Counterpart becomes sought-after for client holiday gifts

ANDY MEEK | The Daily News

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For marketing and design firms - those architects of the clever, eye-catching promotions that grease the wheels of U.S. commerce - it can seem like one of the most high-pressure projects of the holiday season.

What's the perfect thank you gift to send to clients?

Yes, Virginia: Even bottom line-driven businessmen - sans the belly that shakes like a bowl full of jelly - are making a list and

checking it twice. Depending on the company, holiday gifts can run the gamut from personalized pens and notepads to lavish gift baskets.

If you're Counterpart Communication Design, a still relatively young Memphis advertising agency, the secret is to go with something practical, memorable and, yes, still a touch self-serving. So the holiday gift the firm recently sent out to everyone on its client list - personalized stationary - fits all those conditions.

All in good fun

It's also been a big hit with clients on the company's roster - no small feat, considering that roster includes A-list corporate giants such as FedEx, International Paper and Baptist Memorial Health Care Corp.

"Every year, it seems like we always get asked at the end of the year to help agencies out with their Christmas efforts," said Trey Rivalto, vice president of sales and business development for the Memphis-based marketing and printing company IMEC. His company printed the personalized note cards that Counterpart sent to clients this year and which it plans to keep sending in years to come.



PRETTY AND PRACTICAL: This set of personalized stationery, a thank you gift to one of Counterpart's clients, has become a favorite among people who deal with the advertising agency. -- Image Courtesy Of Imec

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"And this has fast become the most pressure-related project these agencies can put on themselves, to come up with something clever and fun for the holidays," Rivalto said.

Counterpart got the idea last year for the brightly colored stationery over a simple lunch meeting. Company founder Sheperd Simmons and account supervisor Lisa Evano were brainstorming ideas at a local McAlister's deli.

For a boutique-sized firm such as Counterpart, whose operation has been humming along since its inception in 2002, the decision looms large each year. How can they set themselves apart from the usual pack of Christmas gift-givers?

Although it's been said many times, many ways, holiday gifts first and foremost must tell clients Merry Christmas - and to not forget about the sender during the coming year.

"The biggest thing for us is we wanted something useful," Evano said. "So we came up with the stationery idea, gave our designer free rein to just go tear it up and he came back with a seasons theme - he did a design for winter, spring, summer and fall."

Off to a good start

Counterpart is the brainchild of Simmons, who decided to take the plunge into entrepreneurship after working for about 12 years at different ad firms around town.

Growth has been steady; in 2005, the firm's staff doubled, revenue was up 66 percent from the previous year and revenue since then has doubled still.

Choosing the holiday gift for those clients who've stuck with and been recently attracted to Simmons' ad firm isn't likely as earth-shattering as landing a deep-pocketed client such as FedEx. But it both says - and is responsible for - volumes.

"It was neat, it was different, and it was very personal," said Mary Costello, marketing and communications specialist for Kele Inc., of this year's Counterpart gift. Memphis-based Kele is a manufacturer and distributor of HVAC-related products.

Costello's company, as did each of Counterpart's clients, got a pack of five note cards for each of the four seasons, so there were 20 in all. Anecdotally, the company has heard that FedEx liked the Counterpart gift more than any other agency gift this year - high praise, considering some of the biggest agencies around send something to FedEx each Christmas.

"I received some from Counterpart last Christmas and went through them by Feb. 1," said Courtney Liebenrood, whose PR firm, Obsidian Public Relations, does promotional work for Counterpart.

Personal touch helps

Counterpart packaged the stationery in a box, including a cover note that wishes the recipient a happy holiday. Forgoing postal service, strained this time of year anyway, the gifts were hand-delivered to clients.

"And I think the thing that's really benefited us as an agency from this gift is not only that they love they got something personalized, but it keeps us top-of-mind with them," Evano said. "Every time they pull a note card out to send a thank-you note, they'll think, 'Counterpart gave this to us.'"

"These clients are like friends to us, not just people we serve every day."

Perhaps the biggest compliment the agency has been paid is that clients who do business with the company early in the year will sometimes joke, "Okay - this gets me on the Counterpart Christmas gift list, right?"