

BUSINESS

In the cards

BY PATRICK CASEY
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The size is almost always the same, yet the style, colour and message they convey vary tremendously.

With a multitude of variations between the nine-centimetre by five-centimetre layout, a convincing business card will often break the ice in the early stages of interaction between clients.

"I really see the business card as the first marketing piece you send out on behalf of the company," explained Daisy Wai, president of Ad2000 and Beyond Advertising, a Richmond Hill company that became one of the first agencies to offer marketing strategies to Canadian corporations for Chinese markets.

IMAGE IS IMPORTANT

"Image is important and when I decided to use a bright, golden colour to help design the card, I associated it with a feeling of moving forward and being aggressive. I thought it was the mark of a prestigious corporation."

For as little as \$35 for a stack of 500 black and white ones, the business card — made to be given away — is one form of advertising that is still freely distributed to the public.

After all, it's hard to find matchbooks anymore and you usually have to buy buttons with slogans.

Thanks to cheaper printing and quality versions created from desktop publishing software on a home computer, business card circulation is actually growing.

"Everyone wants something unique and wants their card to stand out," said Linda McDonald, production co-ordinator for Biz Cards Plus, a Markham-based printing outfit specializing in business cards for more than two decades.

"Some people only have limited dollars to spend, but you can always still come up with something reasonable. You add a colour or two and the price goes up, but basic black ink on a white paper can still be outstanding."

McDonald said she gets a number of requests to add an extra personalized touch to cards, including the picture of a dog on a card for a pet groomer, a black eight ball for a pool hall and a picture of a helicopter they located for a pilot's new card.

However, a funky business card alone is no guarantee for a successful profit margin and budding entrepreneurs should be wary of falling into that trap, warned Debbie Cella, marketing and communications co-ordinator for the Centre for Business Development in Vaughan.

"Most of the clients that come in here spend 90 per cent of their time on a logo and design for their business card and only 10 per cent on their business plan," pointed out Cella.

"People come in with a great idea for a card and know what colour and font they want to use. Instead, they should be worrying about what the business will do."

"A business card is important, but without products and service, your business isn't going to develop. Image is not more important than that."

For years, real-estate agents have plastered their photographs on business cards as an added feature and Thornhill's Paul Zammit admits the technique can be quite effective.

"People are given a virtual relationship with the person whose picture is on the card," said Zammit, who has operated his own real-estate agency for the past decade.

"When Lady Di died, everybody felt they knew her because they had seen her photo in all

the tabloids. When I get calls from clients, I get the feeling like they know me. I walk into a house and people talk as if we have been friends for quite some time, all because they have seen my picture on a card or other piece of promotional material."

But it's perhaps the Asians who take the art of presenting and accepting a business card more serious than most.

ALL IN THE PRESENTATION

With a two-hand approach, the card is often relinquished with a bow of the head.

Custom calls for the recipient to read the card thoroughly before placing it in a pocket, wallet or purse.

"We just present the card in a very humble and polite way," Wai added.

"But sometimes, I believe we can be even too humble. We are taught in our culture that if you know 100 per cent of something, you should only present 50 per cent of the knowledge. That poses a big problem when a Chinese person goes in for an interview and they only let on they know a little bit. It's a cultural difference, but you can learn to dress it up a little bit."

CARDS AND COLLECTIBLES

North Carolina's FlexCorp has been creating non-traditional business cards since 1991, producing cards for more than 1,000 businesses and recording earnings last year of \$1.4 million (U.S.).

FlexCorp has moved from the more traditional card printed on stock paper to showcase pieces made from clear plastic, aluminum, wood, steel, linen and even leather. They will also incorporate holograms, enamels and glitter.

The new digital card is able to store 16 megabytes of data and plays on any standard CD-ROM drive. It releases your name, number, mailing address and has the ability to display multimedia presentations.

The talking online business card combines auto-responding e-mail technology with a sound file that includes a recorded introduction of a company's product or service.

Meanwhile, collecting business cards was long a fad before hockey and baseball cards were the envy of youngsters growing up across North America.

Since 1980, the American Business Card Club has served card collectors. In the early years, the club had just 15 members, but today the list has grown to include people in Canada, England, Italy, Finland, China and Australia.

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