



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Promotion

The first step in selling your work is the promotion of it. Promotion is a business concept that demands the same energy, focus, and creativity as developing a portfolio. Unfortunately most illustrators don't consider business part of their creative process. The business of selling your work is not somebody else's business—it is yours. Making a reputation is a by-product of selling. The kind of work that you get will depend, to a large extent, on what your knowledge of who is doing what, where it is being done, and finding the most effective way of delivering your promotion. This requires research, time, and energy. You have done this in your portfolio. Now you must shift gears and place the effort into a promotion plan. The survival of your clarity in understanding that creating images and selling images are two sides of a coin, not separate activities.

Illustrators can learn much from the fine arts about the application of creativity to self-presentation and self-promotion. Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali, and Jeff Koons are examples of fine artists who realized the crucial importance of the media to a successful career. An ever-growing number of younger artists are seeking to control and manipulate their images and the exposures of their work through all communications channels.

Andy Warhol, pop art guru and inventor of business art in the sixties said, "The best art of all is the art of business." In an interview (*Modern Painters 2*, 1989), Jeff Koons, a former commodities broker on Wall Street, said, "You have to embrace other media and industries other than 'art' as the only way to be effective in contemporary society."

At a time when mass media is defining culture, the marketplace for illustration is increasingly unclear. What is clear is that the traditional forms of promotion in the illustration business have to be expanded.

### Feet in the Door

Traditionally, illustrators promoted themselves by making appointments with art directors and getting their published work into the various annuals. In the fifties, the relationship of art director and illustrator was manageable. Art

directors bought the annuals (*Society of illustrators*, *Graphis*, etc.) in search of new talent. Art directors spent a portion of every day making appointments with illustrators. Promotion, if you lived in New York City, was done on a personal basis. Mass mailings of printed material was a limited concept.

Today art directors for national publications don't have the time to make personal appointments. There are exceptions, of course, but only a few. The business of self-advertising vehicles (*Showcase*, *R.S.V.P.*, *The Black Book*, *Alternative Pick*, etc.) that are sent free of charge to the art director have affected the sales of annuals, which are now up to \$60 per copy. Numerous mailing lists and reference books are sold with thousands of names of art directors. Stock illustration houses, offering low-cost reproduction rights for finished work, continue to grow. Budget cutbacks in the publishing industry and the current preference for photography in all media are challenging the use of the illustrated image. If this sounds overwhelming, it is. Some very clear thinking is required by the freelance illustrator to maneuver the minefield of an effective promotion campaign.

### **Stage One: Research the Editorial Market**

Every illustrator's portfolio has strengths and weaknesses. Take a good hard look at your own work without being defensive. Your most immediate sources for the names of art directors and the companies they work for are the published annuals. Go through the annuals (*Society of Illustrators*, *American Illustration*, *Graphis*, *Communication Arts*, *PRINT*, *How, Step by Step*, *Art Directors*, *AIGA* [American Institute of Graphic Arts], etc.). When you find an illustration that reflects your own work, write down the name of the art director and company name. This is the start of your mailing list. If addresses are not available, look them up on the Internet or crossreference with one of the numerous source books that are available at your local book dealer. Write down the name of the illustrator and address during this process. The annuals list names in the back. Make notations next to the names for people to whom you might want to send a personalized note along with your promotion piece. Haunt magazine racks of Barnes & Noble. Bring a pencil and pad. Expect to spend many hours going through every magazine, regardless of the subject, in search of art directors who use illustrations that you admire. Copy down the names and addresses from the mastheads (found in the front of every magazine).

Alphabetize your growing list in categories: art directors, editors, illustrators, etc. If you have done your homework you will now have anywhere from fifty to one hundred names of people whose work you have seen at least one example of. Sending promotion pieces of your work to a blind mailing list is a waste of time and money. You are trying to make contact with people you know something about.

When you know the numbers you are dealing with, you can start considering the form of the promotion piece itself and how you will finance it. Single-side color postcards are available for approximately \$100 for five hundred. Modern Postcard in California is only one source for this kind of printing. Check around. A common alternative is to use your computer as a printing press. This becomes possible when a mass mailing is not required.

At this stage we are back to your portfolio and your selection of what images best advertise who and what you are. Things to think about:

- Does a single image represent you?
- If not, then how many do?
- Would text (do not include resume) help clarify your illustrations?
- What size and format are needed?
- Are envelopes available?

Your initial research provides the names of annuals and organizations. Write or call them to be put on their mailing list for all calls for entries, announcements of seminars, etc. You are trying to become a member of the illustration community and gain access to information. Expand the flow of information coming to you. Subscribe to magazines and organizations that will provide that service.

### **Stage Two: Research Children's Books, Illustrated Books, and Graphic Novels**

The same research required of the editorial market can be expanded into the book publishing industry. In the book market, pay particular attention to the names of editors. The editors of books have a great deal to say about who illustrates them. Children's books continue to be an outlet for illustrators that work editorially. Consider developing two promotion pieces. One for the editorial market and one for the book market. Although their needs can be similar, there are specific requirements to consider.

Your basic mailing list is now in specific categories that can be expanded into art directors in advertising, TV, pharmaceuticals, animation, etc.

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## Talking about Promotion

**HELLER:** Illustrators are no different from any other businesspeople in that they must promote themselves by putting their names and styles out into the marketplace. As an educator, how do you advise your students to do this effectively, efficiently, and in a manner that earns them viable attention?

**ARISMAN:** Art directors, in my experience, view promotion pieces very differently. Some rely on them to hire new talent and some disregard them, relying on the portfolio drop-off, interviews, or annuals to supply their needs. My advice to students who cannot afford to pay the going rate for *Showcase*, *R.S.V.P.*, *The Black Book* or numerous other promotion vehicles is to never send a single card or a one-page with many unrelated samples on it.

By the end of the first semester in the first year of the MFA program each student is required to develop a series (minimum six images) with a narrative or theme. The images must explore a variety of forms (animal, human) and incorporate the form into environments. The words should be minimal. A title short paragraph or condensed running text. These "visual essays" are hand bound into small booklets or accordion folds and printed out on the computer (minimum of twenty-five). The students are asked to submit a general list of art directors, publications, and editors that the promotion piece is aimed at.

Categories, children's books, editorial, etc., are discussed in relationship to the content of the promo piece. Students research annuals, bookstores, etc., to identify individual art directors whose commission work they respect. I advise students to not get too clever with the promo piece. No tricky folds, no elaborate packaging, and no originals. The intent is a clear presentation of their ideas in a visual essay.

My rationale for sending a visual essay instead of a single image in a promotion piece is simply that the art director can get a better grasp on how the artists thinks and forms an idea. The added component is that it's harder to throw away a small book. After years of doing this I know it works. Not for everybody right away, but it starts the process of moving into the outside

world with your images. Some students have gotten jobs immediately. Some receive replies of interest from art directors and requests to see their portfolios and some get no response until their next promotion piece. This is an ongoing process, not a one-shot piece. Take the time and energy to send a promotion piece that is worth sending.

As an art director, what is your personal view of receiving promotion pieces? How many do you receive each day? Have you ever hired someone or called him to see his portfolio because of a promo piece?

HELLER: I receive as many as thirty postcards a week and at least a dozen URLs for illustrators' Web sites. It's more than too much for two very good reasons. One, I simply cannot process that many artists—many of whom are quite good judging from the postcard. Two, as a form, postcards are not very distinctive. Frankly, I tend to discard them after a week or two because I just don't have the space to keep them in a visible place.

Have I hired someone based on the promo? Yes and no. I usually do not, but one of my key *Book Review* artists, Mark Summers, was first hired purely on the basis of a promotional package that included a file of sheets with watercolor images that were awful, but tucked among them were a few "bookmarks" with portraits in his now inimitable engraving-like scratchboard style. He was "floating" them, as it were. Trying them out for the first time, and I took the bait. Were there others who I hired this way? Honestly, I cannot remember. While I am impressed by many cards I've seen, I prefer to meet the artists, and that's when I feel more compelled to give them work.

But while on the subject of promo pieces I have a slightly different take than you. Or maybe we have the same feelings but express it differently. I agree that the idea of telling a story in six or more images is useful. I further agree that a package of disparate samples is not the most effective way of getting a personality across, and, finally, the postcard format is too generic. But I am not opposed to making a conceptual promotion. The worst idea is one that tries too hard to be clever, but a clever presentation free from artifice is worth its weight in gold.

I remember years ago Henrik Drescher used to mail handmade books as promotions to selected art directors. They were too good to throw out (and honestly, I thought that some day they might be valuable, too). Today I feel that book making is as overdone as postcards. But that's because

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many illustrators who make book-like promotions are really just replicating their portfolio; the book is not a book per se, but a collection of disparate images. Today I'm more apt to save a piece that looks like considerable thought was put into its conception and manufacture. For example, I am a total sucker for anything done in letterpress because this tells me three things about the illustrator: One, that he or she understands fine printing. Two, that he or she has aesthetic taste. Three, there is a level of design sophistication that hopefully will also be apparent in the artwork, as well.

I guess this leads to another point that is important to me. It's one thing to be able to illustrate intelligently, it's another to have a holistic sense of visual communications. If I see that a promotion piece is smartly conceived I have more faith that the artist has intelligence. If the art lives up to this promise then he or she's got a great one-two punch.

So, what other ways do you suggest that illustrators get their work seen by those who will do them the most good?

ARISMAN: The concept of promotion is a step-by-step process regardless of what form it takes (mailers, booklets, gallery announcements, etc.). The first step is to identify the people (art directors, collectors, etc.) who show interest in your work. The second step is to stay in contact. For example: you send out a mailer and get a note back, "Nice work. Stay in touch." A month later you get an assignment from another magazine, you have a small show in a gallery, you have a new piece you are really excited about. You send it to the interested party with a short note—"Thank you for the nice note you sent me regarding my work. I've enclosed a copy of (tear sheet, gallery announcement, new piece) for your files."

Send them an announcement of your new Web site. Web sites are good vehicles for promotion but the same rules apply. Only put up what you are most proud of, not what you think *they* will buy. If you are located in a big city, go to openings—Society of Illustrators, American Illustration, Art Directors Club, etc. Bring your promo cards—if the opportunity seems appropriate, talk to art directors and give them a way to see more of your work. *Never* bring your portfolio to an opening. *Always* know what kind of work (publication, book jackets, etc.) the art director does. Too many young illustrators don't take the time and effort to research the names of art directors and familiarize themselves with past images they commission.

Look for juried shows, etc. Make note of the jury. If you don't know them, find out what they do. Most shows have unpublished sections. If you

can submit in more than one category, each category will have a different jury. Your chances are better of getting something in if you spread out a little. For example: Promotion (advertising category), Editorial, and Unpublished. If you get into an annual, you can print out copies of your page and send it out to potential clients.

It is my theory all art directors have the names of ten illustrators in their minds at any given moment. These are people they have worked with before and know can deliver. Your problem (goal) is to become one of those ten names. This is a catch-22. "Come back and see me when you have some published work," is a comment made often. Obviously, if they gave you some work, you would have published work.

Your options are to find ways of reminding them that you are still alive, still working and creating new things. This assumes, of course, that these art directors have shown you some encouragement previously. The reminders (promo pieces, tear sheets, getting in an annual, etc.) will eventually shift their focus to connecting your name to your work. One day they will take a chance on you. If all goes well you will eventually become one of the ten names in their brain.

Steve, is there any other means of promotion that I've forgotten?

**HELLER:** The best promotion is being published. Becoming visible and making sure that art directors believe that you are a commodity is the best way to get published more and more. When I first started as an art director I looked at magazines (and the occasional annual) because an artist is validated after being published. While I take great pride these days in using artists who have never been published, my eyes still open wider if I see something in a magazine that looks great. Sure this is the real catch-22; but if one gets that foot in the door, with a little more luck it will open wider.

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## Self-Promotion Guidelines

**Don't Jump-Start.** A promotion plan takes time, energy, and money. Do not promote your work prematurely.

**School Is Out.** Send a promotion piece to get work, not to get feedback. Art directors are not paid to be teachers. The response you want is an assignment not a critique.

**Group Support.** Before sending out a promotion piece, get opinions from others: teachers, former classmates, professional illustrators. Then ask yourself if *you* were the art director, how would you respond to your promotion piece.

**Junk Mail.** If you don't know who to send your promotion piece to, you have not done your research. Know where your work is best suited and to whom your mailing is best targeted.

**Promotion Ideas to Avoid.** Don't get too cute or tricky. Don't scent your paper. Don't send a package that is more interesting than your work. Don't include your resume. Don't include work that you don't want to do.

**Form Follows Function.** You are trying to present your work as professionally as possible. For some illustrators a single card might do it. For others, a series of images is more appropriate. Self-editing is crucial.