

## Bucking the Trend

BY BRYN MOOTH

Shifting focus from their own capabilities to their clients' needs helped And Partners evolve from print design studio to strategic partner—and grow during the worst economy in their lifetime.



And  
Partners

It was early 2008, and David Schimmel was beginning to get an uneasy feeling about the business he was running. His friends in the financial industry in New York City were already predicting that the bottom would fall out of the U.S. economy. The consequences of that, Schimmel knew, would not be great for design agencies. Clients would pull the plug on marketing campaigns, stop the presses and cease spending money on creative projects.

Schimmel's Manhattan design firm, And Partners, was nearly a decade old. He had a half-dozen employees to consider, and a client base that included New York City real-estate developers. But his business was healthy: And Partners carried zero debt and occupied office space that wasn't too big for the firm's own good.

Still, Schimmel was anxious—and, as it turns out, rightly so, given that in 2011 the economy remains in second gear rather than overdrive. "I see design as hugely valuable, but I'd stay up at night and be nervous that we wouldn't be relevant next year," he recalls. "I wondered how to be sure we're the 'milk, eggs, bread' for our clients—not a 'nice to have' but a 'must-have.'"

Over two years, the leaders at And Partners evaluated their business and retocused their position in the market to become that must-have partner to their clients. During the worst of the economic downturn, as Schimmel watched other New York creative shops that were saddled with unneeded space and big overheads close down, he quietly hired a stall—and grew revenue. The firm went from six employees in 2008 to 15 today, and saw revenues grow in healthy double digits year-over-year.

These days, And Partners competes with high-powered consulting practices like McKinsey for strategic projects. The firm's portfolio has evolved from solely print to include environments, websites and mobile apps. How did they go from surviving a crummy economy to thriving in spite of it? By changing their focus both externally (on becoming essential to clients) and internally (on hiring and keeping good people).

### BECOMING ESSENTIAL TO CLIENTS

Schimmel opened the firm in 1999 at the ripe age of 23, and had established a reputation as a talented print designer, with a stack of award-winning annual reports under his belt. But the annual report business ain't what it used to be, as companies have scaled back their printed investor communications.

Schimmel points to a project the firm developed in 2004 as something of a turning point in how he worked with clients. Neenah Paper had just spun off from its larger parent, Kimberly-Clark, and its marketing team approached And Partners to help re-launch the brand to the design community.

And Partners could have cranked out the standard paper-mill marketing piece; instead, they devised an event that captured the attention of the design industry and won a shell full of awards. The Punct Project involved a set of 24 punctuation-themed posters designed by luminaries like Stelarc and Sagmeister, which were screen printed in a limited edition, in two colors: black and an eye-catching shade of red. The posters were auctioned at a gala in New York City that drew a glittery audience of creative notables and raised funds for the charity Books for Kids. The international buzz (including a coveted Cold Pencil from The One Club) burnished Neenah's brand. Perhaps as important, Schimmel notes that this was the first time And Partners helped identify a business problem and devise a solution for a client, rather than simply executing the client's existing marketing plan.

Punct whetted Schimmel's appetite for the strategic side of design, and as he worried in 2008 about the declining state of the economy, he realized that he needed to focus more on strategy. Evolving the firm wasn't simply a matter of the type of work they took on. "It wasn't necessarily digital that was the answer," Schimmel says. "I wanted to be essential to our clients."

Through 2009, Schimmel, along with Charlie Veprek, And Partners director of strategy and managing

### IDENTITY REFRESH

And Partners celebrated 12 years and the articulation of their new positioning by introducing a new identity system. "With so much of our work happening on screen vs. in print, we felt it was time to adapt our ampersand in a way that works more successfully across both digital and print media," says David Schimmel, And Partners president and creative director.



**HAVE IT BOTH WAYS**

Never heard of VF Corporation? That's by design. The holding company manages a portfolio of more than 30 high-profile lifestyle brands, including The North Face, Wrangler, Vans and 7 For All Mankind. And Partners has designed VF's annual reports for a decade, including the web and iPad versions and the print edition for 2010 (this page and near right, opposite page). Schimmel says the challenge was introducing a broader suite of services to a client who knew only the firm's annual report work.

ing, and Sarah Hans, executive vice president, worked to identify what made the firm unique and indispensable to clients. "We talked about it in terms of what we weren't, but we couldn't zero in on that special sauce," Schimmel says. "It was the classic Positioning 101 problem, and we struggled with it."

Then in 2010, Veprek and Roger Wong, then the firm's most recent hires, were tasked with leading an office-wide project to nail down And Partners' positioning. "They developed positioning proposals that we as a team evaluated and discussed," Schimmel says. "It was quite an interesting process, and in the end, I believe it brought everyone along. A lot of times, the vision isn't shared organization-wide, even in a smaller 15-person office like ours. This ensured everyone's active participation in the development of the firm."

The process revealed that And Partners' most successful projects had a common thread, Hans says.

The strategy came out of a pattern in the work that we were already doing and the engagements we were most successful with—which was for clients going through some type of change."

That led to a brand-new positioning statement: "And Partners is a strategic design firm that creates change for our clients through insightful thinking and bold execution."

Schimmel explains how that statement is put into action: "We reframed how we approach our work around change. We help companies change. We redefined the same services we offered the day before around change: changing beliefs, behaviors, profits."

**BUILDING STRATEGIC EXPERTISE**

He-tooling your creative agency, of course, is meaningless unless clients and prospects know about it—and care. And Partners had to shift its business pitch away from leading with execution ("We design brochures and build websites") and toward leading with strategy ("We create change for clients"). It's a subtle shift, but an important one as it places the emphasis not

on the output, but on the thinking. As the artifacts of design (logos, especially) become commodities selling for ever-lower prices, successful agencies will thrive because of their strategic competence, not their Photoshop prowess.

Schimmel points to a challenge that many design firms face when they're trying to broaden their reach or evolve into new markets: Existing client relationships, even productive ones, can shoehorn a firm into a particular niche. It's difficult to pursue new types of work without a portfolio full of that kind of work.

But those longstanding client relationships, built on a history of shared success, also can provide opportunities for designers to stretch their capabilities and evolve into a new body of work. Case in point: Neenah Paper. The Punc't project showed the client how And Partners could manage a complex, strategic project and deliver strongly on their promises. That then opened the door to other successful print projects with the company.

In 2009, Neenah was looking to revitalize its 20-year-old Think Ink program, which demonstrated how different ink colors look when printed on various colored papers. In addition to resurrecting the Think Ink publication, And Partners proposed a digital tool that would help designers create color palettes when they're not at their computers, using the then-buzzy iPhone. Neenah's Tom Wright, director of design, agreed to the proposal. The Think Ink Color Unleashed app was a win for the paper company—and more important, it was a proving ground for And Partners to build app-development expertise. The firm then won an RFP bid to create Neenah's website and a suite of mobile and interactive tools for designers, including the Personal Proof service.

Armed with these valuable digital and interactive projects, And Partners had a solid portfolio of new work to show both existing and prospective clients, cementing the firm's evolution from a print shop to a multiplatform strategic consultancy. "There's no easier



way to break that Catch-22 than by talking to your existing clients about what you're doing for other clients," Schimmel says.

Take VF Corporation, for example. And Partners has designed the annual report for this apparel company (which owns brands such as The North Face, Vans and 7 for All Mankind) for eight years. To grow the relationship, Schimmel knew And Partners had to get beyond execution and deeper into strategy. "We were on a hamster wheel. We had a great personal relationship with our client, but we were pigeonholed as the annual report designers. We asked, 'Can we sit down with you and share the work that we're doing with other companies?' When we did, her response was, 'Ohhhh ... you guys do *this!*'"

Schimmel, Veprek and Hans learned that the company was frustrated with stock analysts who underestimated the lengths that VF was going to in order to nurture its many lifestyle brands. A meeting in March 2011 between VF executives and financial analysts was the perfect opportunity for the And Partners team to change the perception.

And Partners drafted a proposal for a multimedia event. They were hired to devise the strategy and communications components, including print elements like a logo and invitation, multiple videos, executive presentations, environmental graphics and an exhibit showcasing VF's innovation. The project culminated with a mobile app that contained the meeting content and allows VF's investor-relations team to communicate on a regular basis with analysts, pushing news, video and other content.

The result? Analyst reports following the meeting cited VF's ambitious vision for growth and solid business plan, and the stock price rose.

### DEEPENING CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Business consultants in the creative field point to referrals as the easiest (and cheapest) path to growth. For example, ask your client contact to connect you

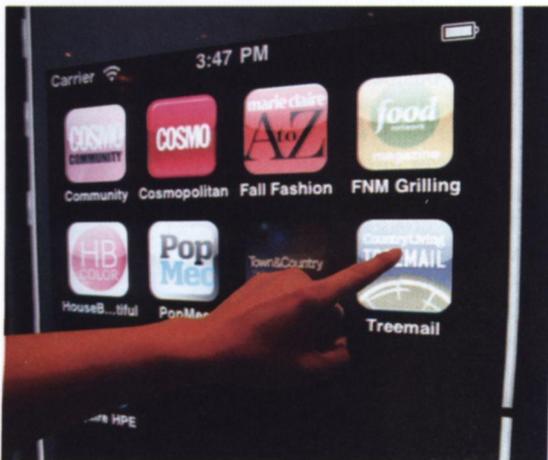
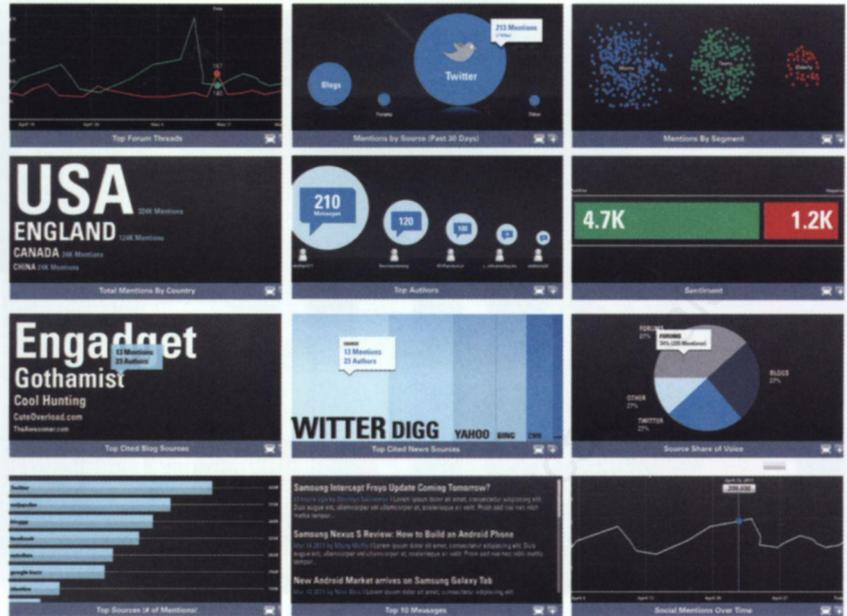
with her peers in other parts of her company. Or, when your clients talk about their biggest business challenges, listen for opportunities where you can strategically help them.

Still, design principals have a difficult time effectively turning existing business into new business. "Bigger agencies do that well: the cross-selling," Schimmel says. "People like us tend to be afraid to jeopardize what we have by being overly sales-y and pitching our capabilities. Our existing clients won't go to our website to see the 12 new case studies of work we've posted. The burden is on the creative person to have that conversation with the client."

Creating client relationships based on strategy changes the design firm's role from order-taker to partner. And this moves the discussion away from, "Can we make the logo bigger?" to "Does this solution meet our business needs?"

"From the start, the conversation (whether with new or existing clients) is more strategic and holistic about their business and communications issues," says Hans, who leads business development and client relations. "In the past, we might start working with a new client on a single project, and if we did well, we would get hired for another, and so on. Now, more often than not, our conversations revolve around several aspects of business from the start, and together, we develop a strategy for how to best communicate with a variety of audiences and media."

Asked if diving deeper into business issues takes him too far away from the creative process, Schimmel acknowledges that designers often miss the roll-up-your-sleeves nature of playing with type, color and images. "But it's a heck of a lot more fun to execute your own strategy than to be handed instructions and told, 'Go do it,'" he says. "As a result of being so integral to the strategy, we still get to build out these things. The client would never go to anyone else for the execution. We still get the thrill of making things—but we can't lead with that."



**PUBLISHING DREAM**  
 And Partners' worked with the Hearst Corporation to create the publisher's application-development workshop. The Hearst App Lab allows magazine editors, customers and advertisers to brainstorm and prototype new kinds of digital content delivery, like tablet and smartphone apps.

## CASE STUDY: HEARST APP LAB

While the debate over print's future rages, And Partners is working with their clients to find the ideal intersection of print and digital communication. The firm's longstanding relationship with VF Corporation has evolved from designing the annual report to creating a multimedia event to reach financial analysts. They've parlayed their love of ink on paper and their interactive expertise to launch an online, user-designed stationery brand called Bloom Stationers LLC. And the print and digital worlds intersected seamlessly in the firm's recent high-profile work for Hearst Corporation, publishers of Esquire, Cosmopolitan, Seventeen and other magazine megabrands.

And Partners principal David Schimmel describes the Hearst App Lab as the culmination of a business relationship that was 14 months in the making. Schimmel and his team had pitched a project to Good Housekeeping magazine; when a Hearst executive who was shepherding that project moved on, the gig, predictably, evaporated. Still, the two businesses remained on good terms. And when a new Hearst initiative developed, a connection between And Partners' Nina Boesch and the client contact helped secure the project.

**Talk about multimedia:** The Hearst App Lab involved nearly every aspect of design, from interior design and environmental graphics to motion design to application design. Hearst executives envisioned a working space in their corporate headquarters where publishing people could brainstorm with media and tech experts—as well as Hearst's advertisers and readers—to develop new mobile platforms for delivering content.

And Partners designed the space and created a custom interface for Hearst staffers to control all the technology in the room. They also developed a content-management system that lets Lab users access images and other assets from the publisher's vast library as they experiment with creating new mobile magazines. A simulator, also developed by And Partners, lets users view their creations on different devices, and a custom research tool offers access to real-time data (via social media and web metrics) about how customers perceive a brand.



## GROWING THE RIGHT TEAM

This more strategic and multidisciplinary approach to their work has led And Partners to a larger team with diverse skills. In 2008, the firm had six staffers; it's now up to 15. The group includes Craig Bailey, a veteran print designer who cut his annual report teeth with the award-winning San Francisco shop Cahan and Associates, and Nina Isoesch, an Action Script master who came over from Lisa Strausfeld's team at Pentagram's New York office.

Associate creative director Brian Crooks is another ex-Pentagrammer who joined And Partners in 2007. "I chose to come here because it was small, more hands-on and it had a scrappiness to it. Crooks says.

Schimmel has attracted new hires with a studio environment that's creative and entrepreneurial. Staffers are encouraged to foster direct client communication, to bring in new projects and to take ownership of their work. "David gives his staff a lot of autonomy," Crooks says. "Sometimes, it's a little too much, because you need a little guidance. But he lets the designers come up with solutions."

As the firm's work has expanded more into interactive projects, Crooks' skills have developed, too: His first project was the VF annual report; now he's deep in a new interactive project for Neenah. He learned about user experience, interface design and information architecture alongside the external development partners that Schimmel brings on as needed for specific projects.

As the team has grown, too, Schimmel has had to learn to let go of some control. It's a particularly challenging point in a designer's career to go from creating the work to managing the work. Schimmel recalls a situation where Hans called him out for micromanaging: "She told me, 'I need you to let me do my work.'" Crooks, for one, is seeing change: "The organization is

getting more collaborative," he says. "It's not just the boss telling you what he wants and walking away leaving you scratching your head. David wants pushback, he wants challenge."

## LEARNING AS THEY GO

For And Partners, the path to success over the past three years has involved building on their experience, client relationships and team. The process has deepened the studio's wealth of knowledge, as each new project allows them to stretch into new disciplines and discover, on the fly, approaches and solutions that they can apply to future projects.

The best example of this institutional learning may be Bloom Stationers LLC, a brand-new initiative that's been years in the making and is set to debut this fall. Schimmel is developing a separate venture that provides private-label paper products for online sale by mass-market retailers. The project is a metaphor for And Partners itself: ink-on-paper communication served up by a technologically intensive infrastructure, the perfect hybrid of print and digital design. The project piggybacks on everything the And team has learned about user experience, interface design and web development.

Hans says that's the firm's objective for the future. "Ideally, as we get better with more experience, we'll take on new clients and projects where we can be used for the best of what we have to offer—and we can learn something new ourselves, whether it be new technology or learning about a new industry. What's important is that we keep learning."

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## DETAILS MATTER

In addition to designing the Hearst App Lab space, And Partners developed a content-management system and user interface that allows lab participants to access Hearst's deep library of text and images. So, for example, users can bring together a bunch of fashion photography and style articles to explore creating a branded app for a Hearst magazine or an advertiser. The CMS also archives these working sessions in a kind of virtual inspiration board.