

PROFILE

PPAI MEMBERS SHARE THEIR STORIES

Creativity In Motion

FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS DOREEN SULLIVAN OF POST NO BILLS, INC. HAS WOWED HER HIGH-PROFILE CLIENTS WITH ENERGY, ENTHUSIASM—AND PLENTY OF FRESH IDEAS.

By Tina Berres Filipski

When your clients include DreamWorks, Disney and ESPN, the bar for creativity is already set pretty high. To sweep them off their feet, you've got to deliver over-the-top creativity paired with spot-on customer service. Doreen Sullivan and her team at the full-service creative marketing agency Post No Bills, Inc. (UPIC: POST0001) in Columbia, South Carolina, work hard to exceed clients' expectations—and they consistently nail it.

"It's finally turned into the dream I've always envisioned," says Sullivan, who founded the company in New York City in 1987 and today offers all the services of a full-service ad agency along with entertainment marketing, branding, merchandising and promotional products. "We've grown through strong branding and strong campaigns. I finally feel we've reached the level of a full-service agency by offering strong creative, integrated marketing and tying promotional products into the mix with purpose. Just putting a logo on an item has hurt our industry and is not what savvy clients are looking for in today's market. Clients need their promotional items to direct or increase traffic to tie a campaign together, to motivate their customers to purchase, to be an extension of their brand that their customers will covet, share or keep."

The California native got her start while a theatre major at UCLA when a friend who owned a merchandising company asked her to source a mug for a client. Without even knowing the industry, she started asking questions such as "Who's going to be drinking out of this mug (so she knew if she should look for 10-ounce, 12-ounce or 14-ounce capacity)?" "What can go in this mug to create additional value? "How's the mug being packaged and shipped (so the recipient will be excited to open the box once they receive it)?" One project lead to another and Sullivan decided to pull up roots out west and try her hand in the Big Apple.

She started in the record industry, promoting new album releases and new artists, and creating fan clubs and products for them. That led to working on events, fundraisers and show dates at venues such as the Palladium.

"Everything in the music industry was over the top and demanded a lot of creative attention," she says, recalling a project for a record label that required putting a logo on the bottom of a hotel pool so it could be seen from overhead by party goers on the hotel's 45th floor. She found an industry company that made oversized plastic floor mats, divided the logo into multiple mats and hired divers to sink the 40-by-60-foot logo and put it together like a puzzle.

"Creating things like that at an early age and working on projects that were fun and challenging really helped us create a niche from the get-go," she says.

While Sullivan attributes much of her company's success to rolling up her sleeves and digging in, there are also times when it pays to sit quietly and just observe. Take, for example, the afternoon very early in her career when she was



TOP Doreen Sullivan was one of the lucky attendees at this year's ESPY Awards, the annual awards event created and broadcast by ESPN.

ABOVE Olympic gold medalist snowboarder Shaun White caught Sullivan's eye at last summer's ESPY's.

sitting on a street corner in New York and noticed all the signs tacked up along the sidewalk that said Post No Bills. What a great name for my company, she thought. “I had an a-ha moment! I thought it was tremendous free advertising—it was all the way down the street and actually all over New York City. Seeing opportunity in what most people overlook is how we’ve taken the company to the agency level we’re at today,” she says.

Sullivan’s next big a-ha moment came in 1991 as she and her former husband were walking down Park Avenue. He unexpectedly suggested they move to South Carolina to take over a family farm. “I said, ‘Are you crazy?’” she remembers asking. “It was the least likely thing I would ever do—and then he showed me a picture.”

She moved straight from Manhattan to Prosperity, South Carolina—population, about 1,000. To Sullivan’s surprise, many of her clients followed her there. She then realized it didn’t matter where she was located; it was the unique items and promotions and the ability to execute that were most important to her clients. She relocated the company to Columbia, the state capital, in 2003 and from there the business continued to bloom as Sullivan recruited talented staff (now numbering 14) and pitched client after client.

Today her client list includes entertainment giants (Paramount, Warner Brothers, DreamWorks, ESPN, Bravo and The United States Olympic Committee) as well as corporate events and festivals, and community groups, such as those to boost South Carolina tourism.

Never one to rely on her past accomplishments, Sullivan says she’s constantly pitching new clients, recalling a recent proposal to South Carolina Port Authority. What sets Sullivan’s pitches apart from most presentations is they don’t include typical media kits or folders of information. Instead, for the Port Authority pitch for example, she packed her information in a logoed treasure chest filled with beads, gold spoons and other hand-picked gold and silver pieces she had shopped for at flea markets and antique malls. She inserted her proposal inside a clear bottle in the chest, which included the tag line: There’s a world of treasure in your port of call.

“It was a piece that not only said, ‘I want to work with you,’ but tells them we understand what their business is,” says Sullivan. “A lot of times when people pitch new business, they send a jump

drive with a PowerPoint and a media kit. They are only communicating what their services or offerings are. I like to switch it around and send



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something the client would want to give out to their customers because immediately they know we have done our homework and understand their brand and their needs.”

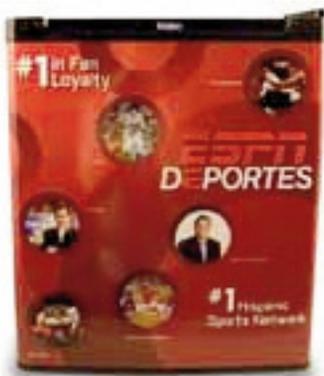
Sullivan explains that winning business is not just about taking a product and making it look pretty. She says a full-service agency must come up with the concept, tagline and an integrated, comprehensive marketing plan. “It’s a lot, and it’s taken us at least a decade to grow into these services,” she says, adding that she personally loves the strategy and branding side of the business. “I think that if I didn’t push to this 10 years ago, it would be very hard now [to support a business selling only promotional products] because people are getting their items from everywhere.”

One of her biggest concerns is that the promotional products industry is focused on price. “That’s never going to sustain this industry,” she says. “People are spending a fortune taking clients out and schmoozing the heck out of them for three-cents less on an order—it’s just not going to work in the long run.” Instead she’s committed to raising the level of respect about this industry through education such as the recent seminar she presented on PPAI’s behalf during Advertising Week in September. Sullivan’s company is also one of the top franchisees of Adventures In Advertising (AIA) and she looks forward to assisting AIA in training its sales force and recruiting professionals that are open and capable of expanding its services.

Working With Creative Clients

When a company works with a client in the entertainment industry, certain challenges are expected, not the least of which is the lengthy approval process. “We understand up front that they are going to go through 30 rounds of edits for one item. But we know that ahead of time and are prepared for it,” she explains.

The process of working with a high-level client begins with the big picture. She spends the necessary time in initial meetings



A recent mailer for top executives featured a mini fridge packed with foods from countries where ESPN Deportes programs. It won a Mark Award.

asking discovery and objective questions and then listening and looking for the “unseen, unexpected purple cow—the ‘why hasn’t anyone ever thought of that?’ moment,” she says. “I’m looking for that ‘wow’ factor.” Her goal is to walk out of the meeting knowing the client’s objective—the end result that will make that client the happiest and create the largest ROI. Then she and her staff examine many ways to tie the biggest idea into the most promotional opportunities and take the campaign across as many media platforms as applicable.

“I work the early discovery process like I’m filling up a funnel,” she explains. “I gather everything about the client’s brand and property, their industry, what’s been successful, what’s worked, what hasn’t. Once I fill up that funnel and have done everything I can to know everything about the client, project and objective, the big idea almost always comes to me.”

Sullivan believes that earning a client’s trust is really integral to a successful working partnership. “I want to know they trust that we’ll do the best for them, we won’t take advantage of them and we’ll deliver for them. That’s the reputation we have.” She

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—DOREEN SULLIVAN



says her biggest reward is when the company finishes a project and someone asks that client, “Who did this for you?”

One of Sullivan’s favorite projects this year was a top executive mailer the company produced for ESPN Deportes, the Hispanic sports network. Post No Bills filled mini fridges with authentic imported foods from the countries where ESPN Deportes programs—banana chips from the Caribbean, Rosa’s tea and gooseberry jam from South Africa, olive crackers and olive paste from Spain and canned beans, salsa and tostadas from Mexico. Every food item had a tag or label that described the league and sport programmed from that country. The fridge wrap was designed by Post No Bills and the total piece was packed in a box and decorated on the outside by stamping importing logos from all the countries that were represented inside. The piece just won ESPN Deportes a 2010 Mark Award, the annual cable and telecommunications marketing competition. The positive feedback received from the top executives who received this mailer was just as exciting as the Mark Award, Sullivan says.

Not everything always works out as Sullivan learned when she launched her company’s intern program many years ago. “I didn’t do my job in training my staff to work closely with them and I let those students down,” she says with regret. But she learned from those mistakes and now runs a robust program with the University of South Carolina and has also recruited many of the students to the company following graduation.

Another learning experience was when a half million imported headsets for Philip Morris were delayed on a ship during a storm on their way from China. She didn’t have a force majeure provision in her contract and had to pay dearly to get the products to New Jersey to make a delivery date. It was an expensive mistake, Sullivan says.

After more than 20 years in the business, she looks back on her success with a deeper appreciation for the path she chose. “My definition of success is when you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. When we’re in balance—when I’m taking care of my employees, we’re taking care of clients and we’re working hard to be the best we can be—opportunities seem to come to us. For a random example, we’ll be working on a project that has to do with bees and all of a sudden we’ll discover a brand new honey in a magazine we just happened to pick up. That happens frequently.”

What Her Experience Can Teach

Her advice to other promotional consultants who want to move into the full-service arena is to truly understand the creative process. “You have to be able to successfully develop strong cre-

ative to succeed as an agency,” she advises. “It’s not just a pretty package. You need to create campaigns that are stellar creatively or you are not going to be able to start billing for those services.”

She also recommends surrounding yourself with creative people, reading creative books and reaching out to other people. “You’ve always got to be training yourself to have a creative eye and looking for new things,” she says. “That’s another problem in our industry. The majority of distributors are used to getting what they need from an industry tradeshow once or twice a year. How many are reaching out to *Ad Age*, looking at what top agencies are doing, studying new marketing avenues and trends?”

Sullivan is quick to acknowledge that her success and that of her company is a team effort. “I have the most amazing staff—it’s a dream team,” she says. “I try to have a really supportive environment and bring in people who are incredibly talented and self managed and give them the flexibility to manage their lives as well. People need to take care of personal things and it’s never an issue. As a result, when we have to work extra hard for a client, that’s not an issue either.”

She reiterates the importance of teamwork within an organization to meet the needs of demanding clients. “Creative space for people to do their jobs, trust and respect is critical to success of any organization but is especially critical in one that’s expected to really pump out strong ideas all the time. You’ve got to work together.” 

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