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The Guide to Attracting and Keeping Great Clients

BRANDING BENEFITS BOTTOM LINE, BOOSTS VISIBILITY

Folks in the Boston area know Judy Nitsch as the dynamic president of the firm that bears her name. She's a presence at local Society for Marketing Professional Services events, speaks at national SMPS education events, and is a presence throughout New England at networking functions.

Her visibility helped the 60-person civil engineering, land surveying, transportation engineering, sustainable consulting, planning, and GIS firm raise its prominence in the Boston area. As the firm grew to have projects in 17 states and five countries, the name, Judith Nitsch Engineering, didn't embody the nature of the firm's high-profile projects and leading-edge sustainability practice.

In May 2006, the firm's principals and leadership team made a unified decision that it was time to drop "Judith" and become Nitsch Engineering. "This new name would accurately represent what we have become over the years and announce to our clients and prospective clients that we are a 'big' firm with 'big' projects.

"One of my partners said, 'We're dropping the word, not the person.' Other people asked, 'Are you going away? Retiring?' I told them, 'No.' We have nine shareholders and projects all over the world. It's not just about me. When we were a WBE firm, having Judith in the name was important. Only 14 percent of our work is as a WBE firm today. We don't really need to be associated with being a WBE. Half of our business in recent years has been in the private sector, and having 'Judith' in the firm name became a negative in those markets."

The firm hired branding consultant Mark Minelli of Minelli Inc. in June 2006 with the goal of rolling out the new name and identity by the middle of October 2006 because Nitsch's marketing manager was going to be having a baby later that month. "We couldn't layer this activity on our marketing coordinator and other marketing staff with the marketing manager not here," Nitsch says. "We knew they would be scurrying to get proposal work done. We only had four months to roll this out, which is a really short time, so we were very focused on getting it done."

The rebranding process involved Minelli meeting with nine of Nitsch's senior employees about messaging and about how the look reinforces the message the firm was trying to send to its existing and potential clients. "Out of that conversation came a 'Eureka!' moment: our brand is that we are 'savvy advocates' for our clients," Nitsch says. "We also needed our look to be more friendly. Our old logo had our name as all uppercase; the name in the new logo is uppercase and lowercase. We kept the color blue. We were happy to

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do that. We wanted to keep our arrow logo because so many people knew it, but we needed to update it. Minelli developed a new look for the logo.”

Nitsch says the most important piece of the rebranding was enhancing the firm’s employees being savvy advocates for their clients. What would a ‘savvy advocate’ do versus a ‘sadvocate’ when announcing their firm’s name change? They would call their clients and ‘leak’ the name change information so they weren’t learning about it first through a mass mailing; clients would get advance notice, which would make them feel important. Employees were prepped on answering various potential questions with role playing to help with the messaging.

The firm rolled out the new name on November 8, 2006. “What we did that day was great,” Nitsch says of the branding rollout. “The night before, we put a roll of Life Savers, a pack of gum, or breath mints on everyone’s desk with a message card saying, ‘Go out and talk to clients. Today’s the day.’”

The new logo also included a new tagline: New name, same spirit. “We used that tagline from November 8 through December 31. We only wanted to do it for two months. Our whole campaign went from a month before November 8, when we started leaking it to people, to the beginning of January. We ended the roll-out by sending a New Year’s card that said, ‘New name, new year, same spirit.’”

For the formal rollout, they sent an e-mail on the day of the announcement to everyone in their database and followed it up two weeks later with a hard-copy, snail mail version of the same announcement since the firm did not have e-mail addresses for everyone in their database. “Plus, if anyone had left the firm, we figured the hard copy might get forwarded,” Nitsch says.

“I was amazed by how many people sent me comments. A guy I went to college with is president of an engineering firm in Philadelphia. He took the letter, scanned it, and sent it to all of his senior people. They have eight offices around the country. He wrote, ‘This is a terrific firm. I know the president. They are a WBE. I don’t hesitate to recommend them.’ I look back at all the different ways we touched our clients and the timing we did it in, and we did a good job. I take no credit. Minelli orchestrated it. We trusted them enough to follow their direction.”

Although they budgeted \$75,000 for the rebranding, Nitsch Engineering spent more than \$100,000 on the campaign, including new stationery, new collateral, new business cards, new signage, and hiring Minelli. “Before the formal roll-out, none of the employees except for the senior leadership group had seen the new logo. On the day of the rollout, each employee got a large puzzle piece. They had to come into the conference room and figure out where their piece of the puzzle fit. By the middle of the day, everybody could see what the new logo looked like.”

The work was not done, however. Minelli did a *PowerPoint* presentation with staff that explained what they had learned from talking to the firm and what Nitsch’s messages were to clients. “You can’t say, ‘We’re on time and on budget.’ Every one of your competitors can say that. Here is what you can say about yourself that your competitors can’t say.”

“Minelli pulled phrases from our client testimonials that were unique to Nitsch Engineering and set us apart from our competition. The phrases we talked about, such as ‘can’t live without you’ and ‘provided clear, comprehensive ideas’ helped employees understand what it meant to be a savvy advocate to their clients. They all realized that they already were savvy advocates for their clients, which reinforced that that’s what they wanted to continue to be for them.”

Nitsch summarizes the rebranding thusly. “It wasn’t just a rebranding; it wasn’t just a name change. It was an opportunity to have everyone in the company understand how to do a better job of taking care of clients. That wasn’t the intent, but it was a happy accident and a fortunate outcome.”

And it was such a success that another firm, J. Stewart Roberts Associates Inc., sought Nitsch’s advice when changing its name. Their marketing person contacted Nitsch Senior Marketing Coordinator Anna Luciano in April 2009. Luciano walked J. Stewart Roberts through the process, sharing tips that Nitsch picked up, including the point that repetition is key and employees should understand the reasons for the change so they can discuss them with their clients.

When your rebranding campaign is an inspiration to other AEC firms, as well as boosted visibility with clients and enhanced internal identity of what your firm is, you’ve done something right. — **ED HANNAN** (ehannan@psmj.com)