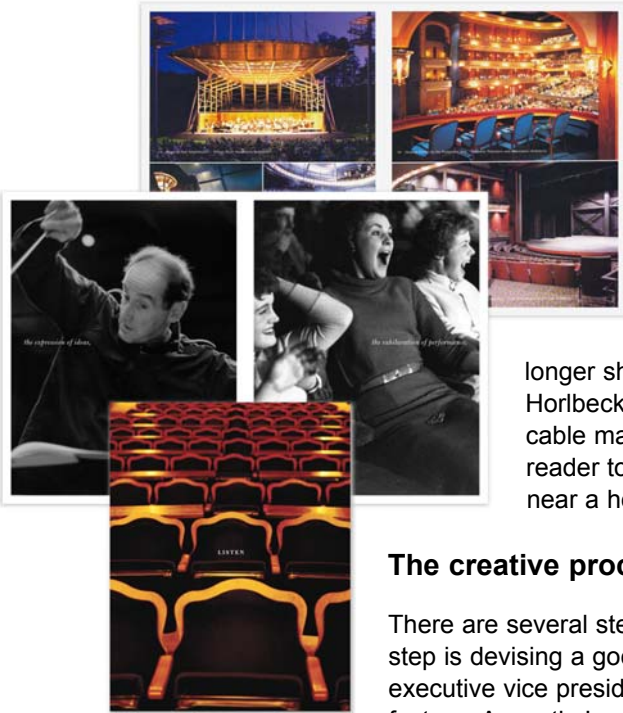


BROCHURES FOR AV PROS

Producing printed marketing materials can help pro AV firms build their company image and increase sales.



In a technology-savvy society that has grown more reliant upon the Internet to disseminate a wide range of information, it would seem that printed brochures would have little value. But there's something about a printed piece that can't be duplicated in an email or on a website. "Ultimately the collateral piece is the door opener that gets the prospect to call, to speak to a person, and form a relationship," says Sandra DeMond, director of marketing at Creative Technology, a Chatsworth, CA-based AV rental & staging firm.

While email messages may not always reach their intended recipients, printed marketing materials offer a physical connection - and a longer shelf life. "The nice thing about a brochure is that it's tangible," says Kirk Horlbeck, senior vice president of marketing at Colorado Springs, CO-based AV cable manufacturer Liberty Wire & Cable. "There's an aspect that allows the reader to sit back and reflect upon it. And it's not dependent on whether you're near a hotspot or a clean network line."

The creative process

There are several steps AV integrators should take to produce an effective brochure. The first step is devising a good concept. "A good brochure is like a resume," says Rick Schuett, executive vice president of Boca Raton, FL-based home-theater interiors and seating manufacturer Acoustic Innovations. "The point of a resume is not to get a job, but an interview."

Schuett recently published a 28-page brochure that explains the benefits of the company's modular media rooms. His goal wasn't to make a sale, but to bring in leads for dealers to close. Of course for pro AV integrators and consultants, the primary issue isn't the product, but whether or not you're the right provider. "You have to learn how to sell yourself first, what your company does, and your value add, or you're going to go the way of the computer dealers in the '90s," Schuett says.

That's why it's important to concentrate on what's unique about your company in the second step - writing copy. Does your firm offer special expertise with a particular type of customer? What do you do better than others in your field? And while using text to highlight your company's strengths is important, simply "saying" it isn't enough. You also need to provide evidence - and the most convincing evidence is often visual. "What the reader really needs to know is that the integrator has done the work before," Horlbeck says. "Pictures of installations can really help."

The next step is to choose the format that's most appropriate for the brochure, which depends on your goals and budget. Probably the most common format is a four-page, 8 1/2-by 11-inch handout, although brochures can run from a single sheet or tri-fold on up. And there's often a trade-off between cost and effectiveness. While larger and odd-sized pieces generally stand out more, they typically come at a higher price.

A targeted approach

Roelien Gorter, public relations coordinator at Chicago-based acoustics and AV consulting firm Kirkegaard Associates, recently published a 48-page brochure created to illustrate the company's strengths. She designed the brochure to walk readers through the company's creative process, with

The 48-page brochure Chicago-based acoustics and AV consulting firm Kirkegaard Associates created to illustrate its strengths combines text, stock photography and images of finished projects.

by Don Kreski

Don Kreski is an independent marketing consultant with more than 25 years experience in the pro AV industry. He holds an MBA in marketing and finance and can be reached at dkreski@kreski.com.

text and photos describing its mission, methods, and better-known clients. Each concept is illustrated with images of speakers, performers, designers, CAD drawings, working models, and finished projects.

Although this brochure is large in size, images make up its bulk. Several pages have only a single line of copy or a single photo with a caption listing the client's name. Yet the text strongly emphasizes Kirkegaard's ability to provide high-end acoustics and AV systems design.

A common challenge AV firms encounter in producing these brochures is addressing the different needs and interests of various readers. For this reason, many AV companies publish multiple pieces for different markets, matching the content to each individual market. Gorter uses one printed piece, but says that Kirkegaard consultants add custom material for each presentation package.

In-house or outsource?

The last step is to decide whether to produce the brochure in-house or bring in a design firm. Michelle Oswald, director of marketing and communications for Tampa, FL-based integrator Audio Visual Innovations (AVI), says her company's staff writers and graphic designers handle these tasks.

However, many AV integrators and consultants don't have that luxury. "I'm a one-woman show," DeMond says, who typically writes her own copy, uses a staffer for photography, and then outsources the graphic design. "I know my expertise and where those boundaries are."

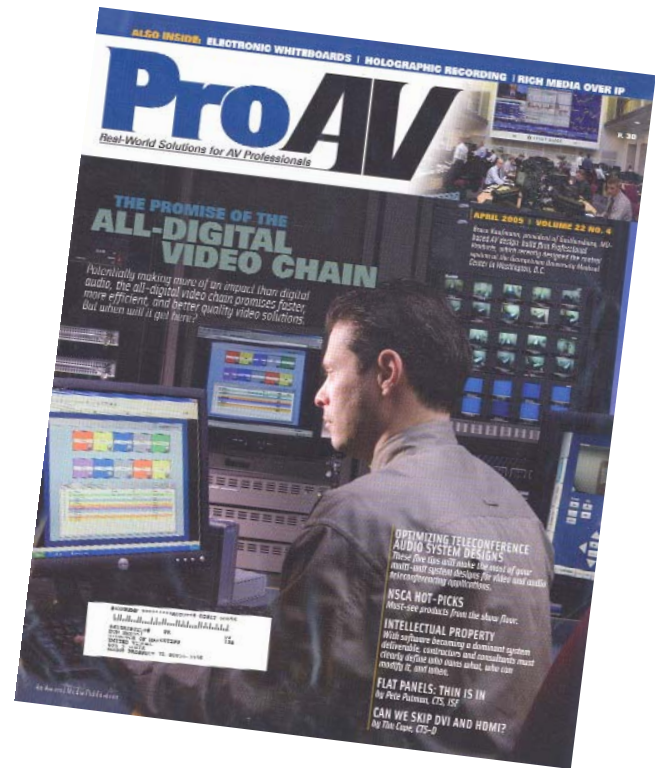
An integrator's budget will vary, depending on the size, quantity, and quality of the finished piece. At the low end, Oswald typically pays about 40 cents apiece (pre-press and printing only) for an 8 1/2- by 11-inch tri-fold brochure.

Premium productions typically cost more. Schuett says his 28-page piece ran about \$1.15 each for 15,000 copies, plus creative costs. On the higher end, Gorter says Kirkegaard paid more than \$16 each - including writing, design, production, and printing with matching letterhead and envelopes - for its 48-page brochure, although it produced only 5,000 copies.

Integrators should determine what they want to accomplish before trying to set a figure for a project. Because Kirkegaard wanted to position itself as a premium designer of million-dollar rooms, an investment of \$16 per prospect made sense. However, in AVI's case, a lower-cost piece was more appropriate because it targeted a less profitable client.

Measuring results

One problem pro AV firms often face is finding ways to measure the effectiveness of these brochures. Horlbeck says Liberty Wire & Cable spends a great deal of time on this issue. It codes all of its printed products and requires its



inside salespeople to record that code when they get a call.

It also periodically tests variations of its brochures, mailing different versions to different market segments. "Sometimes we change the shape and size of the brochure, or vary the message," Horlbeck says.

This type of research is difficult for a smaller firm, which may have trouble paying for a single version of a given piece, let alone the variations for a test. But basing decisions on limited information is better than none. For example, you can put different 800 numbers on each marketing piece to get an idea of their effectiveness by simply counting the incoming calls listed on your phone bills.

Another option is using informal focus groups, which are typically easy and inexpensive to arrange. Schuett tried this approach with his brochure. He put an electronic version on his website, and asked dealers and end-users for feedback. "We probably would have had to print it two or three times by now if we hadn't taken the time to get comments and tune it," he says.

However they gather feedback, each of these AV pros says that brochures are an important part of their firm's marketing mix. "It's your face to the public," Schuett says. "So it's worth a substantial investment of time and money."

Don Kreski is the principal of Kreski Marketing Consultants, which offers marketing consulting services to the AV industry. You can reach him at 847-749-2424 or dkreski@kreski.com or visit his website at www.kreski.com.