



Legibility, lack of clutter and a reminder of what you do are components of effective business cards. Industry experts highlight the keys and the pitfalls.

by **Tom LeBlanc**

What could be more boring than an article about business cards? If that's what you're thinking, I don't blame you. Business cards are so ubiquitous in the custom electronics industry — and every industry — that they run the risk of becoming afterthoughts. Smart businesspeople, however, know better than to let that happen.

Business cards are important and should be a front-of-mind marketing initiative for custom electronics companies, say the judges of the *CE Pro* Marketing Awards (CMAs). The cards represent the image of a business and when left with a potential client they often serve as the sole link to that business. Company owners and salespeople need that link to be strong.

Company Business Card was a category of the CMAs, which were presented at an Electronic House Expo (EHX). The winners were selected by a panel of judges including *CE Pro* editors, advertising agency personnel and industry consultants. Most judges opted to remain anonymous in this article, but Deborah Smith of The Deborah Smith Group, a marketing firm that serves the custom electronics industry, was willing to share her views publicly. Smith was also Tweeter's vice

president of marketing and purchasing for six years.

Entrants sent in their business cards and the judges pored over them. In case you're wondering, Milwaukee, Wis.-based Connectronix took home the CMA. Ultimately though, it's not what the judges think that matters; what matters is what the client holding the card thinks. Still, here is what the judges say works and what doesn't work when it comes to business cards.

WHO ARE YOU?

The most important element on a custom electronics company's business card — what should be most prominent — is the company name and logo. The judges universally agreed on this. What's not universal is whether companies' names and

logos hold any meaning with the potential clients.

For instance, what does Monarch Coast Solutions mean to a potential client who might not remember who gave him the card? Nothing. But the San Clemente, Calif.-based company adds "Luxurious Entertainment Systems" immediately below its nondescript company name. This step isn't necessary for Corona, Calif.-based Custom Audio/Video because its name pretty much says it all.

If what a company does isn't clear from its name or its logo, Smith says such companies should take one of the following three steps with its business cards:

1. Use a descriptive title or function under the person's name that explains what they do. For instance, "home entertainment design consultant" or "home entertainment and technology integrator" are more descriptive than "installer" or "designer."
2. List specialties, but be careful not to clutter the card with too many. Three is best.
3. Use a clear tagline, such as "We make home entertainment easy" or "Lighting design specialists for over 20 years."



ON THE FLIP SIDE

A few of the companies that submitted images of their cards for CMA consideration sent two images: one for each side. The judges didn't agree on whether it is beneficial to use the back of cards. One judge maintained that using the back of the card allows the company to add detailed information about what it offers. Connectronix, the winning company, and Yorba Linda, Calif.-based Diamond Case Designs both did this. This is key, the judge said, because "too little information and the card can easily



become a throw-away because the person might not remember why they have it."

Smith didn't completely agree, saying that the other side should be used sparingly. She recommended using one large image that bleeds



to the end of the card, a tag line or a short list of bulleted services. "I like to keep the back of the card blank, but to make it a solid color that ties in with the predominant color on the front. This grounds the card and creates a very classy differentiated look," she says.



MAKE IT QUICK

If it takes more than a millisecond to glance at a card and recognize what it is, that's bad. It's likely to be deemed clutter and end up in the trash. How important is quick legibility when it comes to business cards? "Very!" Smith says.

Another judge added, "You only have a few seconds to make a first impression. It's important to consider color, typestyle and layout when making that first impression."

The words should not only pop but they should carry some real meaning for whomever is reading them. Milpitas, Calif.-based MR Home Theater does a



good job of achieving quick recognition. The company obviously designs, installs and programs home theaters. As a potential client, even if you don't know what that means, you get the gist quickly. Also, think about the point size of the typeface.

DOES YOUR CARD REFLECT YOU?

First impressions matter. If a card looks extremely professional, it will create a certain image in a potential client's head about how that company approaches business. If a card looks casual, that too creates a perception.

Neither approach is right or wrong, but it matters. Companies must choose, Smith says, how they want their company to be perceived and create business cards that feed that perception. "If you are a folksy company in a small town, you don't want a card that looks too cold and corporate," she says.

Note that Marion, Ark.-based Holcomb Audio Visual Technologies' popcorn box business card doesn't look the least bit corporate.

"Conversely, if you are dealing with very high-end urban designers and architect clients, your card needs to be designed by a graphic artist to communicate a trendy, yet professional sense of style and positioning that includes the right fonts and hip, understated colors," adds Smith

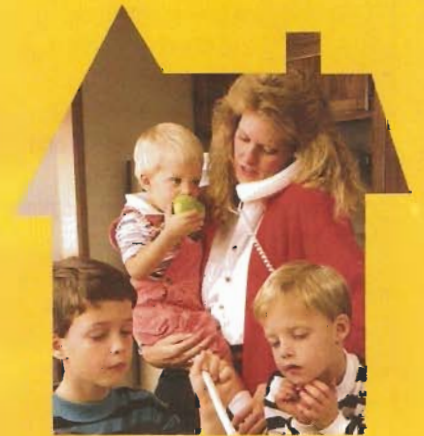


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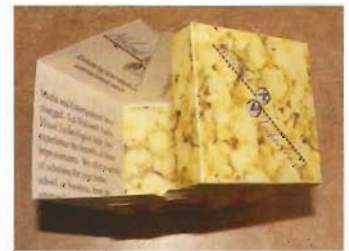
Some people like card games and some don't. The same idea goes for the judges.

Some extremely creative designs submitted for the CMAs raised the question of how cute companies should get with their business cards. The general feeling was that if it's done well, quirkiness is a good thing that can really differentiate a company. If it doesn't work, it will fall flat with potential clients.

Marion, Ark.-based Holcomb Audio Visual Technologies set the bar for creativity among CMA entrants. Shaped and colored like a popcorn box, the card unfolds to reveal company and contact information.

The popcorn box speaks to its home theater services. Still, it's tough to put a popcorn box in your pocket. The judges, of course, were fascinated with the concept, but felt that it worked better as a brochure than a business card.

Everybody liked San Diego-based AudioVideo Consulting & Engineering's clever concept. Referencing the compa-



ny's initials, ACE, it used the back of the card to mimic an ace playing card with the teaser, "Don't Gamble, Deal with ACE." The concept is quick and memorable or as one judge put it, "tasteful and makes an impression."

DON'T GIVE AWAY YOUR HAND

"The biggest problem with most business cards in this industry is way too much information on the card," Smith says.

It's tempting though. Knowing that this card is likely to provide the only information a potential client will have about a company, people tend to want to print their entire resume. That would be a mistake, said the judges.

"You have to be careful not to overdue it," one judge says. "You don't want to scream at the individual with your message. You can lay it out in a stylized manner that clearly states who you are and the brands you represent. Custom Audio Video does this nicely."

Business cards should have a lot of white space, added Smith. "Think of it as



a mini-billboard that uses just one image and a few words to make a lasting impression."

WHAT IS A PICTURE WORTH?

A couple of the CMA entrants have photos of home theaters on their cards. Is it a good use of space? Yes, if it's the right photo, said the judges.

"The home theater [photo] should be a tastefully designed room that exudes style and class that represents the type of work the company is capable of," said one judge.

If a company chooses to use a photo, Smith doesn't recommend having an installer snap the picture. "It should be a professional grade photo with excellent lighting and a strong sense of design. A lifestyle photo is always a good choice."

Diamond Case Designs and MR Home Theater both used photos with TVs in them, but one had an image on the TV and one didn't. Generally, having a picture on the TV screen gives the photo life. An image with a person in it, said one judge, gives it even more vibrancy "because people like to look at people."

While using a photo might pay off, it



takes up space and makes it difficult for companies to fit all the necessary information without creating a cluttered look. Smith offered best of both world scenarios. "The photo can be screened back to act as a background or for the back of the card," she says.

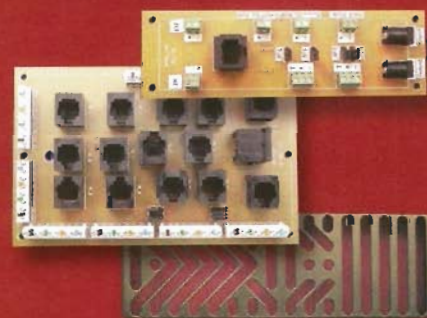
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JUDGING A JUDGE'S CARD

One of the judges of the *CE Pro* Marketing Awards, Deborah Smith, is willing to present her card for scrutiny. Did you agree with her comments about other companies' cards throughout this article? Do you think her card is effective? If not, you can ask her directly. Here's her card.

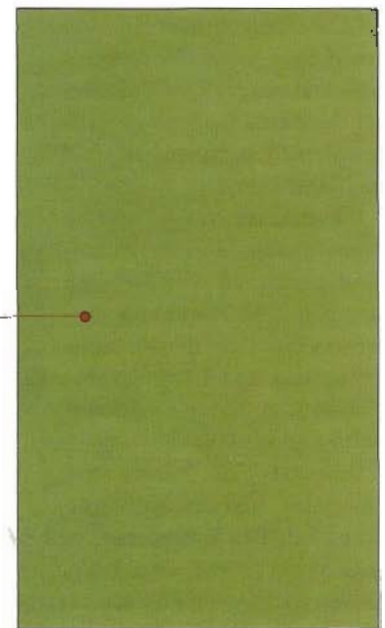
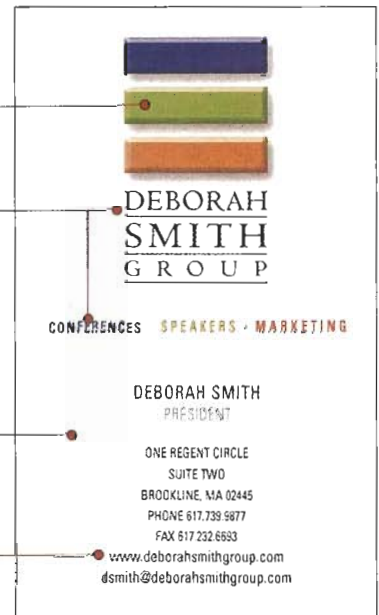
Smith chose a logo that looks nice, reflects her tastes and holds some meaning. The three colors are meant to highlight the three principle offerings of her business: conferences, speaking and marketing.

Eye-popping though it may be, the logo is non-descript, so Smith added her company name and a tagline below it.

"The biggest problem with most business cards in this industry is way too much information on the card," said Smith in evaluating other people's cards. She backs up her position by using white space.

Smith differentiates her Web site with a different color, nudging people to read extra information online.

Some companies like to use the back of the card to list more information, but Smith opts to keep the back of the card blank with a full-bleed color consistent with the front. "This grounds the card and creates a very classy differentiated look," she said.



PLAYING YOUR HAND WITH CARDS

In poker it's all about fives.

- Five consecutive value cards is a straight ... pretty good.
- Five cards of the same suit is a flush ... even better.
- Five consecutive value cards of the same suite is a straight flush ... that's tough to beat.

Business cards are a tough game because it's hard to determine value. What's the most important element to put on your card and why? We had one of the judges from the CE Pro Marketing Awards lay out the top five most important business card elements. By making the most important information pop, dealers can put good cards in their clients' hands.

1. Company logo

Ideally, the logo was created to make a statement. When clients glance at the card they should recognize a distinctive logo that reflects what the company does.

2. Company name

If the company name is clearly stated in the logo, ignore No. 2. If not, take note of how important shouting the company name on a card is

3a. Telephone number

These days, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses are about equal in terms of importance. Telephone numbers win the tie-breaker, though, because EVERYBODY has a phone. Bottom line: If clients have to search for a way to contact somebody they might give up.

3b. E-mail address

Many busy clients prefer to contact companies over e-mail. It gives them a chance to take their time and present their thoughts and also lets them communicate during non-business hours. Also, not everybody enjoys one-on-one conversations.

4. Web site

The business card should act as a portal to a well-designed Web site where prospective clients can check out examples of the company's work, and find plenty of other information.

5. Fax number

Yes, some people still use fax machines. It's definitely less important than it was a few years ago, but a fax number still needs to be there just in case.

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