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Graphics Firm is Showing the Way

by Carole Christie

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If you've never been to Saint Louis University Hospital, yet, on your first visit, you thread your way through the corridors directly to your destination, thank Werremeyer. The Webster Groves company designed the hospital's "wayfinding system."

Werremeyer, says owner Gretchen Floresca, specializes in four areas: branding, graphic design, advertising and environmental design. The latter includes wayfinding systems - the signs that get people from point A to point B.

"You do have to have particular expertise in it," Floresca said. "Typically, signs are made out of metal or glass or plastic. But do they need to be illuminated? Do words need to be interchanged? Does it need to be a system that is encased and you need a key? Can it withstand weather?"

The designer determines the construction material, optimum sign placement, exactly how much information is necessary at each location, and a graphic style that's consistent with the brand.

Some wayfinding systems (for example the kiosk Werremeyer designed for Maryland Plaza at the corner of Laclede and Euclid avenues) do double duty. They serve as marketing tools as well as directional aids.

Besides signs, Werremeyer produces everything from letterhead to fencing graphics for construction projects.

"We design the whole experience - from the ad, to walking into the sales center, to the brochure that people take away," Floresca said. "It's all in the brand - an established look and feel."

Clients include law firms, retirement developments, real estate developers and a truck leasing company.

Floresca joined Werremeyer right out of art school. Her father kept the company small.

"When I started, there were only three - my dad, a secretary and myself," she said.

He was an excellent mentor, she said. "My father taught me to fish. He didn't give me a fish."

In 2000, when her father retired, Floresca took the helm. Over the space of 10 years, the staff had expanded by one employee. Then she decided to increase the size of the business and has surprised herself with the results.

"I think my dad, each year, did about \$600,000," she said. "And last year we did \$2.6 million."

When she first took over, things were pretty slow. But "we started adding more people and we sort of hit our stride," she said.

"You slowly gain great clients over the years, and the goal is to keep those clients. We want to make our clients happy and have them meet their objectives and goals. Every time. That's our goal. We don't really care about awards."

She describes her own management style as "flexible," adding, "We really try to work with people, and not overwork them. Like, we try not to work weekends, which is sort of unheard of in the design industry."

As for the theory that all-nighters inspire creative genius, she said, "I don't believe that. I think you work better when you've had time to re-energize. ... You can relate to people better, that's for sure. ... Granted, there are times when you have to work till 3 in the morning, but I try to make those the exception, not the rule."

Representing the fourth generation of Werremeyers, Floresca said of her career, "It was sort of meant to be." Pointing out that even her mother once worked for the family business, she laughed, saying, "We've never known anything, really, except for family business."

Proud of the tradition - and with seven years of steady growth - Floresca said: "Here, the woman that took it over made the biggest bang. That's what I kind of like about it. I know my grandfather and great-grandfather would have been proud of me - my dad was, especially."

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