

Business Cards Escape the Plain White Rectangle

By TANYA MOHN

Big things do come in little packages.

To hear the experts tell it, business cards, if done right, can attract more attention than the Goodyear blimp.

"It's the most targeted of all advertising, because it is almost always given face to face," said Lynella Grant, author of "The Business Card Book: What Your Business Card Reveals About You and How to Fix It" (Off the Page Press, 1998).

"It's a touch thing," says Bill Vancelette, chief financial officer at EagleDirect, a direct marketer based in Denver that lets large corporations order business cards online. "When you go to a meeting, what do people do? Shake hands and give out business cards. Watch what people do with them when you give them one. They pick them up in their hands, they tend to flip them around, they'll run their hands over the printing."

In recent years, the plain white business card has changed radically. Business cards come in a variety of colors and shapes, and some even have fold-out or pop-up features. There are, it seems, few rules.

But while the business card is here to stay, some innovations may not be. Experts say many offbeat cards don't work. Cards with odd shapes, for example, can be good and bad they may be noticed, but they don't fit in traditional card holders.

Not all cards are meant to be handed out individually. Some businesspeople leave stacks of them in high-traffic locations. Michael Sigety, president of Pic A Card in Bloomingdale, N.J., provides hundreds of thousands of cards a month for companies to display in places like diners and supermarkets. He said cards were the best way for consumers to remember the names and numbers of businesses, because the cards can fit inside wallets. "And most people try to hang on to their wallets," he said.

Digital technology, instead of pushing business cards into extinction, has enhanced their reach. "The more high tech we get, the more we need the soft touch," Mr. Vancelette said. "More people are carrying business cards than in the past."

Technology can work hand in hand with business cards. Scanners, for example, can feed data from a business card into a computer database. He also uses Vcards business cards that arrive as e-mail attachments and can be downloaded into a home computer or personal digital assistant.

There is no official data on the number of business cards produced each year in the United States, but **The Right Stuff of Tahoe Inc.**, in Reno, Nevada, estimated it at 15 billion.

The company produces business cards with bar codes printed on them. The cards can be fed into a proprietary reader that downloads the data into a computer, bridging "the gap between paper and the computer," said **Kirk Korver**, a vice president at the company. The software, called **RightCardReader**, was more accurate than traditional software used by optical scanners for downloading business card data, he said.

David E. Carter, a marketing consultant who has written extensively on corporate identity, sees other trends. For example, college students, particularly business majors, often carry cards to give to prospective employers.

Technological advances have paved the way for other changes, too. More people are using desktop software to design and print cards at home. There are holographic cards, scented cards and "mood sensitive" cards that react to body temperature. Some businesses now distribute CD's to be run in a computer drive, creating a kind of multimedia business card. Even traditional cards have moved beyond paper: some are printed on wood, plastic or metal. Many are tiny works of art.

The graphic design world has taken note. Rockport Publishers is compiling its fifth edition of "The Best of Business Card Design." Kristin Ellison, a Rockport editor, said business cards offered "high design for the common man."

Pam Aviles, production director of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, a nonprofit organization in New York, said cards with printing on both sides, once considered taboo, were now practical because so much new information like e-mail addresses, cell phone numbers and other data must fit on them.

Gale Zucker, a photographer from Branford, Conn., stopped using traditional cards several years ago after clients ignored them. Now she hands out larger cards, featuring images from her portfolio on one side and contact information on the other.

The oversized cards have been enormously effective as mini-rsums.

"I've gotten some good jobs," she said. One job, photographing high-level executives of an investment firm, was offered after an executive of the company picked up and saved one of her cards, which included a picture of three aging munchkins at a "Wizard of Oz" festival.

David Formanek hopes that his new card will have the same impact. His business, Totally Wired Electrical Contracting in Milford, N.J., had received almost all its work from a division of Lucent Technologies now a separate company called Avaya. But with Lucent's troubles, he lost Avaya as a client. Needing to expand his client base, Mr. Formanek is revamping his old card, a simple block print on tan paper. Customers had always commented favorably on the logo he had used on his truck: a cartoon figure with a light-bulb head, electrically charged red hair and sunglasses, so he is putting the same figure on his new business cards.

Ms. Grant, who is based in Colorado Springs, said that at least 85 percent of cards she saw did not do the job for which they were intended. "Almost all fail for the same reason," she said. "They don't connect with their marketplace." But Ms. Grant, who offers business-card analysis for a fee on her Web site, www.giantpotatoes.com, said many problems could be easily fixed. She said four of the most common mistakes were failing to mention the nature of the business clearly; overcrowding; being too impersonal; and making the print too small in crucial areas like phone and fax information.

Diana Ratliff, who publishes an online newsletter called the Business Card Bulletin on her Web site, www.businesscarddesign.com, also sees many ineffective cards. She finds drawbacks, for example, in printing on the back side of the card because many people may never see it, or in using abbreviations and acronyms that may be understood only by industry insiders. In conjunction with Linda Carroll, a graphic designer in Mississauga, Ontario, she ran a contest in her newsletter earlier this year, offering to fix the five business cards most in need of help. Betty and Daryl Pierson of Jupiter, Fla., real estate consultants, held

one of the winning cards. The redesigned card added lots of color and whimsical illustrations of flamingos against a backdrop of palm trees. Ms. Pierson said. "I was searching for something different," she added. "It's the kind of card, when you give it, people will say 'Wow!'"

Glen Odiaga, owner of Elegant Remodelers, a contracting company in Highland Park, Ill., contacted Ms. Carroll several years ago about creating a card to reflect his upscale clientele. The old card, which was created with clip art on a home computer, had "zero impact," Mr. Odiaga said. He did not want a standard logo image like a saw or hammer.

"There was no unique feel to it; everyone copies everyone else," he said. "I needed to have something to make me stand out."

The new card depicts two stately lions, back to back. Mr. Odiaga says that in the last two years, business has doubled, and "I think that business card started it all."

Ken Erdman, founder of the Business Card Museum in Erdenheim, Pa., said the tradition of business cards went back to the 1600's. Over the centuries, color, design and even humor were sometimes used effectively, a trend interrupted by the Depression, when cards became more austere as both paper and printing became more expensive.

Business cards have also attracted private collectors like Jack Gurner, a photographer in Water Valley, Miss. He began accumulating cards in the 1970's, specializing in cards of other photographers, and now has more than 7,000 from that market niche. Other collectors favor the cards of famous people or just try to collect as many cards as they can.

Mr. Gurner, a moderator of the International Business Card Collectors group, says members swap them like baseball cards. There are, he said, legendary cards like that of Sitting Bull, said to be in a private collection in Los Angeles.

Mr. Gurner favors professionally designed cards over cards created on home computers. "You wouldn't show up in running clothes for a business meeting," he said.

And Ms. Grant, who has also seen thousands of cards, often signs her book with this admonition: "May your life be as interesting as your business card."