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## 'Signs of the times' crop up around Tampa Bay

Premium content from Tampa Bay Business Journal - by Margaret Cashill , Staff Writer

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It could appear in an updated logo, a new sign or even a fresh coat of paint.

In a slow economy, marketing investments are often the first to be axed. But the visual evidence says a rebranding trend is happening in Tampa Bay.

Creative Sign Designs, an architectural signage and consulting company based in Tampa, built its business on residential and street signage and even mailboxes for new homes.

The housing market decline could have led to big losses.

Instead, the firm built its commercial sign business and found a customer base of hotels, health care organizations, apartment communities, college campuses and others.

Creative Sign's revenue increased to \$8.6 million in 2010, up from about \$5 million the year before.

New signage can draw attention to a property and freshen up its look, said President and CEO **Jamie Harden**.

Not every company that puts up a new sign does so because business is lacking, but companies may be more inclined these days to reconsider image and brand, especially as it manifests in physical space.

"If you're trying to sell, you have to work harder to sell something today than you did three years ago," Harden said. "You can get a new website, new marketing materials or maybe a little bit of all of that."

"Brand" isn't just marketing. It's part of a company's physical space, said **Nancy Walker**, president of **Walker Brands**, a destination branding firm specializing in mixed-use and residential developments.

The period of "wait and watch" following the economic downturn is winding down, Walker said.

"No one wanted to spend anything on marketing, let alone invest in anything, until they could figure out where the marketplace was going," Walker said. "Now we're starting to see a turn."

Clients these days look for a strong return on investment, Walker said. She helps companies make sure as many "touch points" as possible reflect the brand.

### Elements of a brand

At the heart of any branding effort is an emotional connection between the customer and the company, said **Sam Stern**, "chief brandtrepreneur" of CAP Brand Marketing in Sarasota.

CAP serves financial, health care, information technology and nonprofit industry clients, many of which are entrepreneurial firms.

Social media has opened up in this conversation. Information that used to require calling around or organizing focus groups is now available 24 hours a day via social media, Stern said. "Smart companies are listening and engaging customers."

### GENERATING BUSINESS BEYOND THE SECTOR

The good news for businesses, said marketing executives: A company may seek assistance from a marketing or branding firm, and the output can generate business for a variety of companies. Graphic designers, construction firms and interior designers are just a few to benefit.

Brand is an expansive concept, no longer limited to a single logo or ad campaign, said Karen Post, president of Brain Tattoo Branding.

“It’s the sum of everything they do. It’s product performance, advertising and communications,” Post said.

— Margaret Cashill

**WHERE A BRAND BEGINS**

To clients presenting a business challenge or opportunity, Evan Brownstein, chief marketing officer of Fry Hammond Barr, will facilitate a “brand discovery process.”

“Who are you, who do you want your customers to be, and how can you get there?” are questions Brownstein asks his clients.

The answers determine the “brand architecture” upon which signage, television, social media and other forms of communication are based.

Companies with strong brand positions often have been diligent about brand building all along, and are responsive to current and prospective customers, Brownstein said.

— Margaret Cashill

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