

Communication Arts

AMERICA'S PREMIER CHRONICLE OF
ADVERTISING + DESIGN PROFILES SS+K

Washington meets Madison Avenue (with a touch of Hollywood)

Generally speaking, politics and brand advertising don't mix. Most companies trying to build a brand tend to steer clear of political issues and tactics, for fear of alienating potential customers. And most politicians, when an election is on the line, are apt to turn to Washington political marketing specialists instead of the ad agencies best known for selling products.

But the rising New York agency ss+k is out to prove that a firm with political consulting and public affairs roots can cross over into the realm of brand advertising. ss+k's leaders think that politics is actually a good training ground for success in today's fiercely competitive and rapidly-evolving product marketing environment.

"Our roots in politics have given us a certain mentality that involves moving quickly, knowing how to integrate all kinds of tactics and collaborate with partners, and figuring out how to get the job done by any means necessary," says ss+k founding partner Lenny Stern.

Formed in 1993 by Stern and partners Rob Shepardson and Mark Kaminsky, all of whom met at the pioneering political consultancy Sawyer Miller Group, the new firm initially was much stronger in public affairs and public relations than in advertising. "When it came to politics and policy, we've always tried to bring creativity into those areas, where it's often lacking," says Shepardson. But the bigger challenge for ss+k was to bring creative advertising into the mix, so that the agency could achieve full marketing integration (ss+k was promoting the "I-word" well before it became a worn-out buzzword in the ad business).

Before ss+k could conquer advertising, the firm needed to find the right person to spearhead that part of the business. In its early days, the firm had linked up with a well-known ad creative director named David McCall, a co-founder of McCaffrey & McCall. But McCall was in the latter stages of a storied career by the time he joined ss+k. (In 1999, McCall was on an overseas volunteer mission to help Kosovo refugees when he tragically died in an accident).

By 2000, ss+k still hadn't found the creative director who could lead it into the future. "It was not an easy search," says Stern, "because we needed someone who understood traditional ad creativity, but who was also thirsting to apply it in new and different ways. Bringing in Marty Cooke was a seminal moment for the agency."

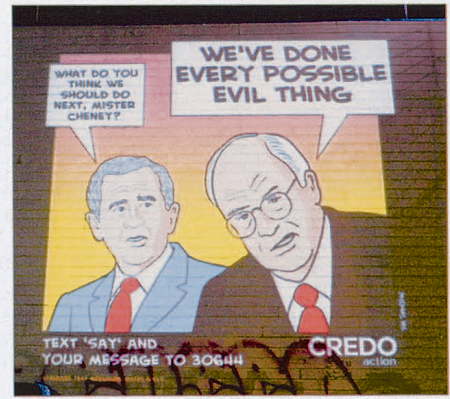
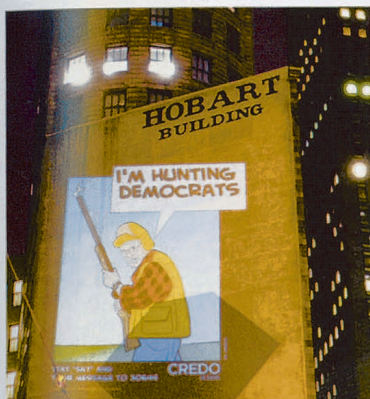
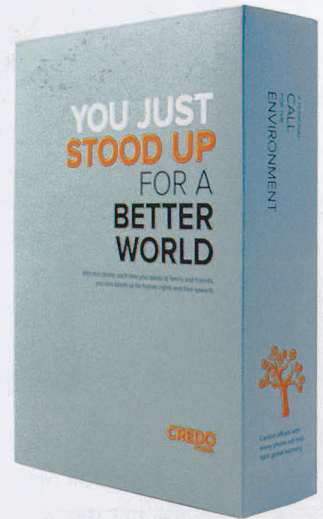
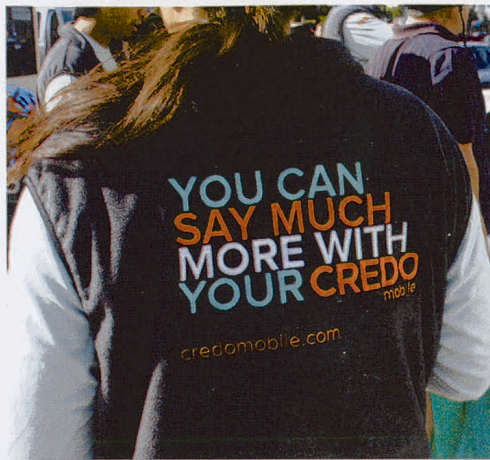
Cooke had earned his creative chops and a passel of awards during his years at top creative agencies such as Scali, McCabe, Sloves and Chiat/Day. He was also a big believer in Jay Chiat's vision of reinventing advertising and creating "the agency of the future."

Marty Cooke is the chief creative officer on all projects. SS+K supplied the caption information.

Right: "We created the name and identity for **Credo** and designed the packaging as well as branded merchandise like a solar-powered charger and clothing." Shelly Bevilaqua/Sonya Fridman, designers; Alice Ann Wilson, design director; Elena Salij, strategy; Working Assets, client.

"Live text projections for Credo launch. Passers-by were invited to text Dick Cheney's reply to George Bush's question. The answers were projected, unedited, into **Cheney's speech bubble**." Mike Rosen, art director; Joe Sayaman, writer; Tom Tomorrow, artist; Elena Salij, strategy; Neverstop, production company; Working Assets, client.

"Credo launch. The **split-sentence device** appeared on bus posters and bus stops as well as in magazines and online." Mike Rosen, art director; Joe Sayaman, writer; Elena Salij, strategy; Working Assets, client.





© Sonya Fridman

After a stint at the agency Merkle Newman Harty, Cooke set out to start his own integrated agency combining design, advertising and PR. But his business partner pulled out of the startup venture at the last minute. "Then I met with Lenny Stern

and he said, 'We're already working on exactly what you want to do,'" Cooke recalls. With that, Cooke came aboard.

Cooke acknowledges that soon after he did so, he had doubts about whether he'd made the right move. "I felt like I'd gone off the grid," he says. Cooke was used to doing a lot of high-profile commercials and print ads, but that wasn't the goal at ss+k. "This was not the place to come and build your TV reel," Cooke says.

It was, however, a good place to experiment with new forms of marketing, beyond the standard commercial or print ad. It took a while for Cooke and his new partners to bring that experimental thinking to fruition. The turning point happened about three to four years into Cooke's tenure, when some of ss+k's non-traditional brand marketing campaigns began to click.

One big breakthrough came on behalf of the telecommunications client Qwest, which was trying to reach a younger target audience. Instead of an ad campaign, ss+k devised a complex urban game called Conqwest, to be played with cell phones in select cities around the country. Working with a gaming professor, ss+k structured a live, street-level treasure hunt that took advantage of a new technology, image recognition. The agency embedded special coded images or "semacodes" in outdoor ads around town; when kids photographed the images using their cell phones, they received clues that helped them move ahead in the contest. The game became a news event in each city where it took place, and the extensive media coverage led to heightened awareness of Qwest, particularly among the target audience.

The agency has taken similar unconventional approaches in its work for clients Time Warner Cable, MSNBC and Credo mobile phones—using everything from texted messages

projected onto the sides of buildings to interactive in-theater audience participation games. Gradually, ss+k began to prove that its diversified, integrated model really did make sense. When the agency won the account of Delta Airlines, just as it was emerging from bankruptcy in 2006, ss+k got involved with everything from ads to brand identity to improving the experience of Delta passengers. This included changing the atmosphere at Delta terminals as well as producing humorous short films, shown on the airline's in-flight screens, acknowledging the trials and tribulations of modern air travel. The results were impressive: The campaign was credited with helping Delta achieve a 300 percent jump in quarterly income.

If ss+k's work tended to run counter to conventional ad campaigns, that may, again, reflect the influence of the agency's political background. Stern says that political work taught ss+k how to "zig" when an opponent "zags"—an approach that ss+k has now codified and trademarked, under the moniker of "asymmetric marketing." The agency was first introduced to this concept, according to Stern, while working on a project with the Pentagon and learning about "symmetrical warfare"—which involves responding in like manner to every action by an enemy: "Meaning," Stern explains, "if they have a bomb, we need a bomb, and if they have a ship, we need a ship." The agency realized that most marketers engage in this same type of symmetrical combat, and that ss+k could gain an edge by trying to do what the competition *isn't* doing—i.e., you counter the other guy's commercial not with your own commercial but with something totally different and unexpected like a street game or wall projection. That's asymmetric marketing.

If brand marketers warmed to this strategy, so did clients in the public affairs space. Some high-profile foundations, including the ones run by Bill and Melinda Gates and by cyclist Lance Armstrong, came knocking on ss+k's door. In the case of Armstrong, he was trying to build awareness for his cancer survivors group and ss+k's efforts contributed to what can only be described as a cultural phenomenon. It all revolved around a single media vehicle—not a commercial or a billboard, but a yellow wristband. Armstrong had already been talking with his sponsor Nike about creating some type of cancer survivors' wristband, but it was ss+k who helped "brand the band." The agency came upon a word, buried deep in

This page: "SS+K posed next to a construction site near its offices in lower Manhattan to underscore its desire to always be a work in progress. The partners include Rob Shepardson, Lenny Stern, Mark Kaminsky, Marty Cooke and Brad Kay."

Right: "Spectra Visual Newsreader is a branded, alternative navigation site for msnbc.com news, born from the integrated A Fuller Spectrum of News branding campaign. It repackages existing msnbc.com content into a playful 3-D environment with experimental interactivity, features and site architecture." Matt Ferrin, art director; Sam Mazur, writer; Matt Ferrin/Sam Mazur, associate creative directors; Fluid/Remon Tijssen, project design and development; Marco Christis, programmer; Michelle Rowley, strategy; msnbc.com, client.

"Newsbreaker Live: the first-ever interactive cinema game. Motion-detector cameras sensed the collective movements of the audience, turning them into a crowd of human joysticks. The game premiered before big movie premieres for *Spider-Man 3* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. A video of the game got hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube." Matt Ferrin/Sam Mazur, associate creative directors; Brand Experience Lab, project design and development; Michelle Rowley, strategy; msnbc.com, client.

Armstrong's Web site, that played nicely off his name: "LIVESTRONG." With SS+K's prompting, that word went onto the wristbands, which, it was jointly decided, should be yellow. The bands subsequently took off, and did so "without a lick of advertising," Cooke notes. As of today, more than 70 million of them have been sold.

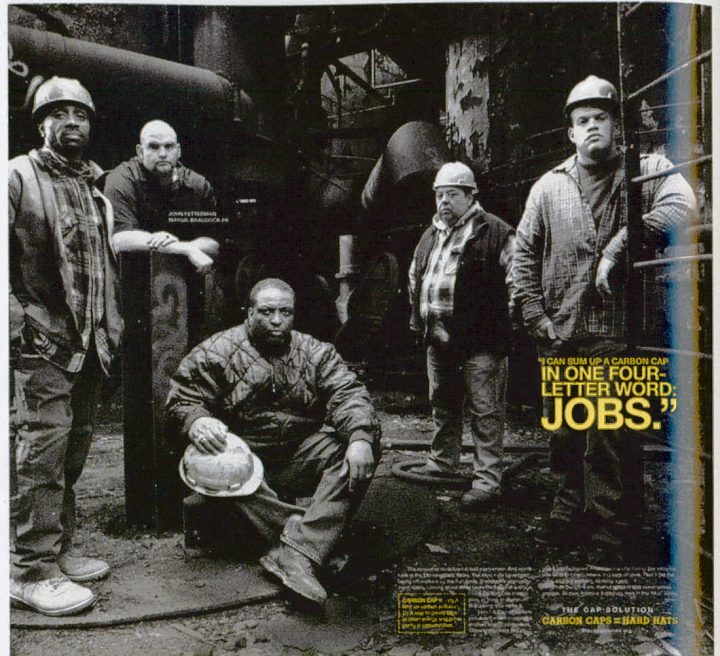
Helping to make sure those yellow bands found their way onto the wrists of famous and influential people, SS+K relied on help from the famed Hollywood talent firm Creative Artists Agency (CAA)—which owns a minority stake in SS+K and often partners with it on projects. Stern says CAA's impact goes beyond just hooking up the agency with stars; the two firms often

This page: "For the client, **Environmental Defense Fund**, getting a carbon cap bill through Congress was an environmental issue. But in the middle of a recession, our research showed it had to be sold as an economic issue: job creation. By featuring John Fetterman, the telegenic mayor of a troubled steel town, the campaign showed how a carbon cap would create jobs for out-of-work steelworkers." Sonya Fridman, art director; Marty Cooke, writer; Michael O'Neill, photographer; Rebecca Matovic, strategy.

"**My Rich Uncle** is an alternative student loan company. Parents and students assume that the only source of student loans are college financial aid offices (which often foster this misconception). To break this pattern, this campaign implied that you weren't using your brain if you went to the financial aid office without looking into My Rich Uncle." Peter Cortez, art director; Daniel Bremmer, writer; Dimitri Daniloff, photographer; Alex Grossman, strategy.

Right: "To engage hard-to-reach teenagers for Qwest cell phones, we created a seminal Big Urban Game called **Conqwest**. The downtown districts of ten western cities from Phoenix to Denver became 'game boards' for rival high school teams of teens. The playing pieces were twenty-foot-high inflatable animals like grizzly bears and mountain lions. The clues were semacodes (a variant of barcodes) that appeared on taxitops, billboards, flyers and coffee cups. Players photographed the semacodes with their Qwest cell phones, sent the photos to a Web site which in turn told them how to move their inflatable animals and win points. Conqwest sold a lot of phones and got a lot of free airtime on numerous local newscasts." Vik Bhalla, art director; Alice Ann Wilson, design director; Humberto Jiron, writer; Maya Frey, associate creative director; Josh Kilmer-Purcell, creative director; Kevin Slavin, executive producer; Rebecca Matovic, strategy.

"We were part of the Obama Media Team specifically in charge of **mobilizing the youth vote**. Young people overwhelmingly favored Obama but couldn't be counted on to actually turn out to vote. What did motivate them to action were the issues: the war in Iraq, the economy, the environment, etc. Breaking the time-honored convention of showing the candidate, we enlisted street artists to illustrate the hot issues and paired the art with user-generated headlines to make posters, online banners and newspaper ads which ran massively in the 22 battleground states. Obama not only won the election, the youth vote outpaced the popular vote by fifteen percent." Peter Cortez, art director; Scott Thomas, designer; Daniel Bremmer, writer; Aaron Amaro/Sam Brown/Tristan Eaton/Max Estes/Brian Flynn/Sonya Fridman/Caleb Kozlowski/Aaron Meshon/Tes-One, artists; Rebecca Matovic, strategy; Obama For America, client.



I DIDN'T USE MY BRAIN. I WENT STRAIGHT TO THE FINANCIAL AID OFFICE.

Most families aren't prepared for what college costs today, so why do they check their brains at the door when it's time to get a student loan? Smart families know that the financial aid office isn't their only option. It takes fifteen minutes to save thousands of dollars on a student loan with My Rich Uncle. That's probably why more and more people are learning that thinking saves thousands at MyRichUncle.com.

Student Loans
MY RICH UNCLE
thinking saves thousands





This page: TV spot for the New York Knicks. "After a terrible season and the bungled departure of the legendary Patrick Ewing, the fans were angry. Into this hostile environment, the Knicks were fielding a team made up mostly of unknown young players led by a new coach. Featuring famous Knicks fans like Spike Lee and John McEnroe interacting with life-size cut-outs of the players and coach, a series of commercials showed the faithful embracing the new team. Despite another losing season, online ticket sales went up 58 percent."

"Spike + Larry" :30

(Open on Spike Lee having a one-way conversation with a life-size cardboard cutout of Knicks coach Larry Brown over lunch at Junior's Deli in Brooklyn) Spike Lee: New York Knickerbockers head coach, Larry Brown. You were born in Brooklyn, weren't you? I grew up here. Right down the block. Back in the Mecca, the world's most famous arena. I was thinking, we've got to play defense. The last couple of years, we didn't play defense. Defense! None of this lollygagging, rooty-poot, okie-doke stuff. You get on the court, you gotta play. Larry, are we going to play defense this year? Larry, talk to me. Larry, defense.

Super: New York Knicks logo. Knicks fans know.

Josh Kilmer-Purcell, art director; Marty Cooke/Marc Lucas, writers; Josh Kilmer-Purcell/Marc Lucas, creative directors; JJ Lask, editor; P.S.260, editorial company; Spike Lee, director; Oscar Thomas, producer; 40 Acres and a Mule/Bullet, production companies.

Delta Airlines TV spot. "Over desolate shots of an abandoned airport, an announcer intones, 'Nowhere is it written that an airline lives forever...' By admitting its shortcomings and revealing its realization that it must change or die, Delta Airlines bought credibility for its claims of change."

"Anthem" :60

(Open on a montage of shots of an abandoned airport)

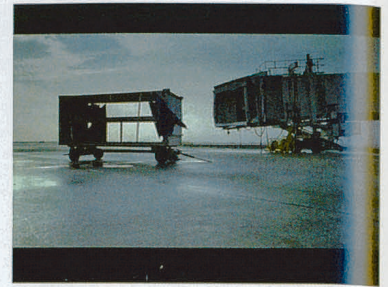
Anncr. (VO): Nowhere is it written that an airline lives forever. Even some of the great ones have come and gone. We can ignore your needs and accept the same fate, or we can change.

(Montage of shots illustrating change on the ground and in the air)

Anncr. (VO): Change means rethinking every moment of your travel experience. It means getting you through the airport and on the plane quicker. It means better stuff to watch, hear, play and eat on board. It means more flights to more places on schedules that fit your own. And it's a promise to keep changing. Welcome change. Welcome to the new Delta.

Super: Delta logo.

Bryan Chiao/Josh Kilmer-Purcell, art directors; Jack Cheng/Marc Lucas, writers; Josh Kilmer-Purcell/Marc Lucas, creative directors; Damion Clayton, editor; Spotwelders, editorial company; The Rumormill, music company; Rob Sanders, director; Oscar Thomas, broadcast producer; Backyard Productions/Bullet, production companies.





brainstorm together on how to weave Hollywood storytelling approaches and techniques into brand marketing campaigns. Those in-flight films made for Delta? CAA played a big part in conceiving and producing them, and the Hollywood agency did likewise with indie-style Web films made for client eBay.

For New York-based ss+k, that Hollywood connection has proved valuable. But a piece of the agency's heart still resides in Washington, and so it was particularly gratifying when ss+k had the opportunity to work on the Obama presidential campaign. Tasked with mobilizing young voters in 22 battleground states, ss+k utilized design (the firm's designers created a striking iconic symbol it calls the "Ocon") as well as a guerrilla-style poster campaign that solicited images from street artists.

The campaign helped solidify Obama's big youth advantage. The agency also benefited just by being associated with a winner, and by soaking up some good lessons that could be applied to other marketing challenges. "We learned a lot about 'orchestrated spontaneity' from the Obama campaign," Cooke says. "The way they used social media, everything felt like it was just happening—but that campaign was incredibly disciplined and planned."

The same could be said of ss+k's current success—it may seem like a new and sudden development, but it's the result of fifteen-plus years of planning, strategizing and working to get the balance right. Today, with the staff having expanded to more than a hundred, the agency is still tweaking the model: The addition of the newest partner, ss+k president Brad Kay—former head of Draftfcb's digital practice—is an attempt "to double down on our digital capabilities," says Shepardson.

It's all part of ss+k's endeavor to have every possible weapon available as it engages in "asymmetric marketing" warfare. By imbuing its brand campaigns with the kind of tactical flexibility, creativity and aggressiveness associated with election contests, ss+k is appealing to clients who recognize that the stakes have been raised in today's marketing environment. "In politics, you win or you go home," says Shepardson. "And we're finding that these days, the corporate world is really responding to that sense of urgency and focus." **CA**

This page: "This 'Change' campaign launched a new, chastened Delta Airlines out of bankruptcy. It wasn't enough just to promise change, change had to be tangible. The campaign touted Delta's improved food, drink and on-board entertainment." Peter Cortez/Josh Kilmer-Purcell, art directors; Marc Lucas, writer; Josh Kilmer-Purcell/Marc Lucas, creative directors; Mikkel Vang, photographer; Alex Grossman, strategy.

"The yellow band was a collaboration between SS+K and Nike. Nike had done wristbands for other athletes, but none came close to the impact of the LIVESTRONG band. To date, over 70 million have been sold. Nike and SS+K both suggested the color yellow, derived from the color of the Tour de France winner's jersey worn so famously by Lance Armstrong. We had the idea of imprinting the word LIVESTRONG on the band. 'What to wear...' is the invitation to the CAA (Creative Artists Agency) party at Cannes. It was the debut of the LIVESTRONG band. A-list celebrities were photographed with the band, kicking off the phenomenon." Alice Ann Wilson, designer/design director; Maya Frey, writer; Lance Armstrong Foundation, client.