

Tactical Magic Celebrates 10 Years

By Sarah Baker

It was 10 years ago this month – amid some of the most uncertain times in the nation’s history – that Trace Hallowell founded Tactical Magic.

He had completed his commitments at Thompson & Co., took a month off to drive around the country with his family, and came back ready to work.

“I didn’t know that 9/11 was imminent,” Hallowell said. “Had I known, I might have made drastically other plans. But I just kind of reached the point where if I was going to start a business, it had to be then.”

A 25-year veteran of the advertising business, Hallowell’s creative branding work has received numerous international honors and has been published in books, magazines and college textbooks.

With a diverse resume under his belt, Hallowell’s motivation for founding his own company was the desire to create the kind of culture that he would want to work in.

“Even before 9/11, we were seeing a lot of economic pressure on budgets and traditional ad agencies were responding to that pressure by expecting the creative teams to spend less time solving problems for clients,” Hallowell said. “That was the variable that could be adjusted – do the same work, just do it faster. To me, that time often represents quality.”

So Hallowell hypothesized to break the business model by keeping the time and the passion that goes into creative problem solving, but without the big overhead.

“Instead of the people sitting in their office playing solitaire on the computer because they didn’t have anything to do but we still have to pay their salaries and keep their computers running, I thought, ‘What if we took a more collaborative model to the business?’” Hallowell said. “Not just an attitude and rolodex, but an intentional model where we pull in people as we need them and send them away when we don’t need them.”

Besides Hallowell, Tactical Magic’s staff is comprised of only three full-time partners: marketing strategist Susan Ewing, chief financial officer Mary Hallowell, and designer Brian Borgman.

It also outsources work to some 20 third-party experts, including designers, writers, interactive specialists and broadcast producers – most of whom are local – as a way to maintain a high level of creative work without having to cost the client more.

“Memphis is home to creative ideas that have changed the world,” Hallowell said. “This town also had a great reputation in advertising and design. Strong local talent and strong local firms make the environment that much more conducive to us.”

Cost effectiveness is also why Hallowell decided to set up shop at 1460 Madison Ave., which was originally built in 1900 as The Donna B Apartments. Tactical Magic is the primary tenant in the recently renovated building, but it also serves as the headquarters of the Memphis chapter of AIGA, the professional association for design.

“It’s fairly affordable real estate, we’ve got big offices available where we have literally had individuals, clients and whole groups come in, plug in, go to work as long as they needed to and leave when they needed to leave,” Hallowell said.

The benefit Tactical Magic brings to its clients, Hallowell said, is a marriage of art and science. In fact, that’s how the firm got its name – by combining strategic discipline, “Tactical,” with highly creative expression, “Magic.”

The firm dubs itself, “the brand identity specialists.” That’s because it approaches every problem with the same principles, yet applied in different ways.

“I grew up in the ’60s and can remember the great

old ad campaigns in detail,” Hallowell said. “Often, the commercials were more memorable to me than the shows. Brand identity is more than just names and logos. It is the art and science of using strategies, words and imagery in order to build a favorable perception. Our secret is doing the basics right.”

And it’s got the track record to prove it. Brands served regionally and nationally include Fulmer Helmets, ServiceMaster, U-Store-It, PetSmart Charities, Memphis Bioworks Foundation, Agape Child & Family Services, Highwoods Properties, Leadership Memphis, Temple Israel, Memphis Redbirds, OrthoMemphis, Visible Music College and more.

During the next 10 years, Tactical Magic aims to grow in both staff and in creative challenges. Because when budgets are tight, companies just have to be that much smarter about how its dollars are being spent, Hallowell said.

“One thing is always certain,” Hallowell said. “No one will buy your product or service if they’ve never heard of it. You have to give them a reason to care about it. My goal will never be to have the largest staff, but to work with brilliant partners and help clients build great brands.”



Trace Hallowell is managing partner and Susan Ewing is senior partner and marketing strategist for Tactical Magic. (Photo: Lance Murphey)