

Olson Tackles Workplace Connection

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MAKING A CONNECTION

To communicate, someone sends a message and someone receives it. Yet much can go wrong in that simple process. Advertising professionals understand this better than most. If their communication doesn't connect with the audience, the client message doesn't reach the market and sales and business suffer.

"Connection is all that counts" is the mantra at Olson, an independent full service brand connection agency in Minneapolis. "The philosophy, creativity and science of our business are devoted to building and activating communities for some of the world's most coveted brands."

This approach also defines how Olson planned their new workplace. "Communication, connection, community. This is our mission and our culture," says Sue Williams, vice president and director of operations. "We wanted an office that helped us live that philosophy."

Williams explains Olson's four goals for a new work environment:

collaboration — "Absolutely key; it's one of the things that make a successful advertising firm."

maximize real estate — "A space that worked well now, was flexible, and would still work ten years from now."

attract and keep great talent — "It's a constant talent war in an agency town like ours; the work environment can be a huge benefit."

display the brand — "Connecting to the community, our clients, the market, that's all part of our story."

Privacy Wall GS demountable glass walls open up small group spaces and private offices, encourage information and idea sharing.

As part of the move to its new workplace, Olson would combine two separate offices into one, and many employees would be working together in the same office for the first time.

DESIGN

"They look at their work as creating communities. It's how they approach the world, really. So we used that conceptual approach as a thread throughout the entire space," says Betsy Vohs, architectural designer/senior associate at Gensler, Minneapolis.

FrameOne benching workstations put agency staff side-by-side in client teams and nurtured the flow of information and ideas. Workstations were assigned by Williams and the COO, who intentionally mixed together people from the two formerly separate offices and asked them try it for 60 days before requesting a move; few later asked to change.

“The goal was a simple platform around two work modes, focused and collaborative,” says Vohs. “We wanted a kit of parts that would support both modes, and FrameOne does it. It’s beautiful and simple and it’s completely flexible. It’s easy to transform a workstation from focused to collaborative. It’s not like a typical open plan environment where everything feels static. It’s an active architecture in the work environment with a dynamic quality that people really like.”

The workstation approach worked so well that shortly after move-in when acoustical screens were installed between facing benches, many employees objected. “They said, ‘Can we take these off? I can’t talk to my neighbor.’ That’s a big victory for our work environment strategy,” notes Williams.

“By making offices out of glass and without doors, you think about the space in a totally different way. It’s privacy through enclosure, not separation.”

BETSY VOHS | Senior Associate, Gensler

A number of small group spaces and individual private offices are built with Privacy Wall and Privacy Wall GS full-height demountable walls, but of these 45 enclosed spaces, only six of them—executive offices—have doors. “It gives them an open collaborative feel, so you see someone walk by, you can still have those spur-of-the-moment conversations,” says Williams.

“The offices are small, but by making them with glass and without doors you think about space in a totally different way. It’s privacy through enclosure, not separation,” said Vohs.

Privacy Wall’s flexibility was demonstrated soon after installation. “Our creative director wanted a view of the city. It was easy to swap in a glass wall in his office,” says Williams. “Now he has a fabulous view of downtown, right from his desk.” Two other offices were also reconfigured within months of move in.

Olson’s former office had two media:scape collaboration settings; now they have five. They were originally used by the agency’s digital media team and “they would tell people in other parts of the agency to meet at a media:scape. They became the favorite places for people to collaborate. It was important to make media:scape available to a lot more people, so we invested in three more. Everyone uses them now,” says Williams.

Vohs planned media:scape locations to make them as accessible as possible. “They’re between public and private spaces or embedded in the work area. They’re collaboration tools right where people need them.”

One of five media:scape collaborative settings embedded in the workplace one of the many places where connection and collaboration fuel creativity at Olson.

An outdoor deck: one of the many places where connection and collaboration fuel creativity at Olson.

SOLUTION

Olson's previous workplace had the default ad agency color palette: white. Pale walls, ceilings and furniture on a grey carpet created a bland landscape. Not surprisingly, Williams says "People were looking for color."

The new Olson workplace is splashed with saturated colors on acoustic screens, upholstered mobile pedestals, storage and seating. "We really dialed up the materials against the gray and white benches. It gives the space a lightness and a lot of life and gives employees a framework for them to display and share their work. It's an engaging space that isn't overwhelming, a playful yet very effective work environment," says Vohs.

Olson avoided another pitfall common in the industry. "For many agencies the most important space is a big, wow pitch space. Unfortunately, your pitch room can be great and the lobby can be great, but if the overall work environment isn't working for you, you've missed the most important thing," notes Vohs. "This work environment works for everyone, including clients."

The agency wanted to greater collaboration, strong branding, and a covetable workplace that maximizes real estate and its new office connects on all counts.

"This work environment is very simple but very effective and extremely flexible. It's a small kit of parts that can move and shift easily to help make Olson's business successful," say Vohs.

New recruits are wowed by the work environment. Clients, vendors, and other businesses are constantly visiting and complimenting the space. "Our employees show their families and friends through the office. Our clients book all kinds of meetings here —focus groups, even board meetings. One client set up a standing meeting every other Friday in our conference room," says Williams. "We love that. It keeps clients close to heart, as we say."

The Olson office communicates and connects, notes Williams. "What Steelcase helped us accomplish in the workplace aligns exactly with what we needed: communication, connection, community. That was our goal. Our office accomplishes that now and we know it will do the same ten years from now."

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