

BY MATTHEW PORTER

KOHNKE HANNEKEN/MILWAUKEE: BETTER THAN CHEDDAR

THE REAL DEAL, THROUGH AND THROUGH, EH?

If you pay a visit to Greater Milwaukee's official Convention and Visitors Bureau website (www.officialmilwaukee.com), you will be greeted by a torrent of gee whiz that arguably captures the voice of the Great American Midwest. You can almost hear the marching bands, the snap of an American flag waving in the breeze. It gives the palpable sense that this is a place where all mustard is yellow and all dogs are friendly. ¶ "Welcome to Greater Milwaukee, the **Genuine American City**," [emphasis not mine] says the site, unmindful the visitor is surfing and without a hint of irony or doubt. "Today," the virtual guide barks from beneath its virtual pith helmet, "savvy travelers want **authentic American** [ditto] experiences. **Milwaukee delivers!** [ditto, ditto] We are a meeting place of people and cultures. A place where the past, present, and future come together. Milwaukee is the real deal, the **Genuine American City** [ditto, ditto, ditto] through and through." ¶ Oh, stop. Who in their right mind would write a sentence like "where past, present, and



THIS TRANSIT POSTER WAS ONE IN A SERIES THAT RAN THROUGHOUT THE MILWAUKEE MARKET IN SUMMER 2001 ACCOMPANIED BY A SERIES OF HUMOROUS RADIO SPOTS.

OPPOSITE: AD TO PROMOTE AN EXHIBITION OF ALBUM COVER ART AT THE EISNER MUSEUM IN MILWAUKEE.

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By most sane measures of success, Kohnke Hanneken has arrived. The reason lies in the simple fact that its partners and colleagues decided long ago that Brew City is a good place to build a business. “Agency people on both coasts see our work and ask us why we’re in Milwaukee. Sometimes I wonder that myself,” admits Denise Kohnke. “But then I am reminded: No one here has more than a 15-minute commute and that drive takes us past beaches and woods toward homes that would cost 10 times as much somewhere else.”

future come together ... Milwaukee is the real deal ... through and through,” let alone publish it on a website? Alright, so the Visitors Bureau is a bit corn doggy. But there is something about Milwaukee that you’ve got to love. There is an honesty to it, an unself-conscious pride that complements its brief summer. I mean, if you’ve got to snag tourists, you better be loud and shameless here because the summers are short and the winters are hell. It might be pushing it, however, to claim “over 1.7 billion new and renovated tourism and hospitality amenities.” Sure, if you include every breath mint in every glass bowl from downtown to Wauwatosa.

Never mind. Setting lends context. This is about Milwaukee’s future. This is about a young agency that is helping to get Milwaukee there. About people who reflect the Milwaukee beyond the brats, cheddar, baseball, and beer. People who go to the city’s acclaimed Santiago Calatrava expansion museum and buy tickets to the All Star Game at Miller Park. This is about Kohnke Hanneken Advertising, not as famous as Genuine Draft, Harley noise, or the Potawatomi Bingo Casino, but, hey, just wait—stranger things have happened in Milwaukee.

1 LET THE TOUR BEGIN

Kohnke Hanneken’s outdoor campaign for former client and aforementioned loquacious Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau included this succinct, self-effacing billboard gem: *It’s Like Chicago, Six Million People Ago*. Memo to ex client: less is more.

Kohnke Hanneken occupies 9,000 square feet of warehouse space at 233 North Water Street in Milwaukee’s historic Third Ward. The walls are “cream city brick,” floors are hardwood, its balcony overlooks the Milwaukee River. It is a casual place. There are no suits and Fridays end, humanely, at noon. Playing billiards is required. It is a place where honesty and fairness are expected and the opportunity to do original work is a promise kept. And dogs—who occasionally contribute a turd to process, proving they are no better, or worse, than their two-legged masters—are welcome.

The firm was founded 10 years ago by Rich and Denise Kohnke. He as creative director, she as president. Creative director and writer David Hanneken joined the firm in 1996 after the Kohnkes split with writer Steve Koeneke, mercifully sparing Milwaukee (and the world) an agency with more K’s, N’s, and H’s in its name than staff on the floor.

Over time, Kohnke Hanneken has distinguished itself with sharp, humorous writing complemented by compelling, elegant art direction. It is a writer’s agency, perhaps, but also a place

where art direction lends a level of refinement often missing at the Alphabet Soup Mega-Agencies. Here, creative energy is visible in postcards, billboards, and broadcast, leaving the impression the people here actually care. The agency’s 20-person cast has seen its diligence affirmed by a sagging shelf of peer-supplied hardware, including OBIES, One Show medals, Chicago ADDYs, and the local equivalent, Milwaukee’s Adworkers Show trophies.

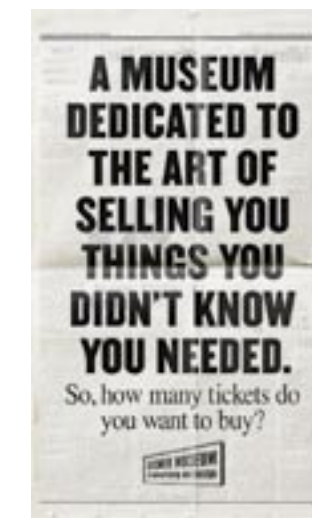
2 A COAST OF ONE’S OWN

But while the firm’s stature is growing, it has in its portfolio no Detroit cars, no Cincinnati soap, not one Genuine Draft. It is a group winning respect the hard way—with intelligent and compelling writing and art direction for local, regional, and (a few) national clients that are not household names such as Alverno College for Women, The [Milwaukee] Blood Center, Chicago’s Blommer Chocolate Co., the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Milwaukee Brewers Baseball Club, the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design, and The YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee.

So what makes these people tick? It is not the money, or the fame, or the chance to lunch with the Big Black Dogs at Hal’s in Venice Beach. “From the top down, this place is fueled by doing good, solid work. Not getting a budget to shoot in L.A., not getting a title, not expensing sushi, not getting a piece of Nike, but by doing good work every day,” says Hanneken. He thinks the firm’s strength comes from something others could consider a failing: The belief in an “outmoded, aw-shucks idealism” that says if you do the best job, work real hard, give more than you receive, “jump higher and faster and play with a pure heart,” you and your clients will both win big one day. Right on, Dave.

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The people of Kohnke Hanneken know their town and are committed to it. They have seen it change and grow. They say Milwaukee spreads its own rumors and formulates its own jokes about itself. People who live there can laugh about it; but they



(TOP) NOT A TYPICAL CROSSWALK AS SEEN IN A POSTER FOR ONE OF MILWAUKEE’S INNER CITY PARISHES. (MIDDLE) A BILLBOARD FOR THE DOWNTOWN YMCA TARGETS THE CITY’S ACTIVE BUSINESSPEOPLE. (BOTTOM) NEWSPAPER AD FOR THE COUNTRY’S ONLY ADVERTISING MUSEUM.



GETTING HAPPY FEET FOR THE FRED ASTAIRE DANCE STUDIOS (TOP); THE HUMANE SOCIETY'S TRANSIT BOARD TO PROMOTE SPAYING/NEUTERING PETS. (MIDDLE); BILLBOARD FOR THE WELK SHOW IN BRANSON, MO. GRANDPARENTAL GUIDANCE IS SUGGESTED (BOTTOM).

can also participate in its transformation in ways that make a real difference. Kohnke Hanneken has. The agency site states, “we do not do pro bono work for the purpose of entering awards competitions, but rather, to help causes,” distinguishing itself from those who do pro bono work only because their real work sucks. Kohnke Hanneken puts its timesheets where its mouth is, helping many in need including Hang Tough Milwaukee, Partnership for a Drug Free America, the Milwaukee Women’s Center, Discovery World, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Humane Society, Milwaukee Art Center, the Volunteer Center of Greater Milwaukee, and Healthcare for the Homeless. And despite their best efforts, their pro bono work wins awards.

Kohnke Hanneken is not simply a creative agency run by three 40-something locals where dogs mill about and kids shoot pool to create ambience. It is a gutsy business that makes a promise that would make most coast-dwelling, Prada-wearing, sushi-slurping ad sissies pee in their pants. The agency promises that, given 12, 18, or 24 months, it can “positively impact” its clients’ brand value and revenue by “maximizing short-term sales growth” and return on long-term investment by creating “preferred brands” that do not require “unnecessary discounting” or “excessive media purchasing” to drive sales. You’ve got to be either nuts or really good at what you do to make that offer (or live in Milwaukee where somebody might not notice).

“Everyone who works on an account, from creative director to broadcast producer to media buyer, must understand this,” says Denise. “You’ll see no division between creative and account service departments in our written materials or in our process.” She did forget to mention the dogs; but certainly they, too, play a vital role, if only to sniff out charlatans and slackers.

The agency defines creative as an “interactive” process that leads to “well-targeted, well-concepted, well-produced integrated marketing communications” that are “the defining element in a client’s brand development and the most influential element in the success of any given ad campaign” (a.k.a. the leaven in the bread).

“Advertising becomes a commodity only if you accept all the propaganda agencies put out,” says Rich Kohnke. “Everyone says

they create brands, everyone says they work differently, everyone says they have a multidisciplinary, proprietary, acronym-laden team approach to problem solving. But saying it does not make it so. You must live it. I know a client can pick up a phone and call any employee here and ask if this place is different from any place he or she has ever worked before.”

3 NOW TAKING ORDERS

Kohnke Hanneken *is* like no other place. A place where people invest time learning about clients’ business and culture. A place where you give more than you get. A snowshoe manufacturer once asked the firm principals to send an account executive to work at its office full-time, without pay for three months, to learn how snowshoe orders are filled. Apparently, snowshoe order filling is a complex process in icy Wisconsin. “We resigned the account,” Rich says. There are limits to anyone’s principles.

Meanwhile, down out at the Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau, snowshoes are never the issue. There, summer lasts forever. Flags are always flapping in the lake breeze. Kegs are still tapped at Miller Park. Buses filled with expectation are still pulling up in front of the Potawatomi Bingo Casino. Lovers linger at the Villa Terrace Italian Renaissance Garden while men (and women) sporting mullets chug Miller Genuine Draft on the banks of Lake Michigan before disturbing aquatic life with chrome-plated exhaust pipes that roar into the night. Time stands still, a perfect Kodachrome postcard.

But not at 233 North Water Street where one group is helping to propel Milwaukee forward with great work, day after day, season after season, practicing an “aw-shucks idealism” that says if you give more than you get, you might succeed beyond your dreams. And if not, well, you can still enjoy the beaches and the woods on the way home from work.

Kohnke Hanneken: Where the deal is real, every day, **through and through** [emphasis mine]. ²₂

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