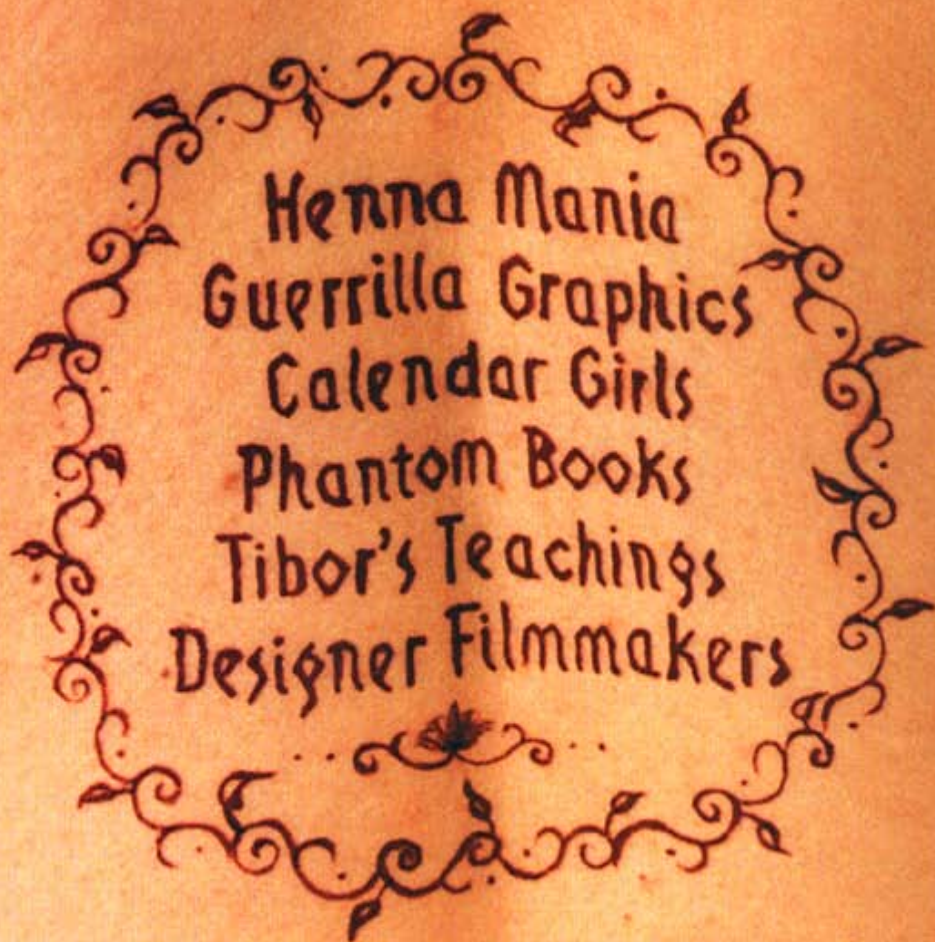


print

America's Graphic Design Magazine



\$8 Print LIV:III

By Akiko Busch

HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

NO CONTRACTS.

NO EGOS.

NO ATTITUDES.

DKB's ad campaign

promoting Rutgers

University's sports

programs takes

a refreshing

vérité approach.

Get into the game.



Sports graphics were taking themselves pretty seriously a few years back. If you believed half of what you saw, moral, spiritual, psychological, as well as physical reinvention were all just a matter of owning the right snowboard or jog bra. Nike, of course, started it all, and then ended it all with a mid-'90s ad that suggested domestic abuse might be prevented by owning the right running shoes. Since then, things have lightened up and loosened up considerably. Levity, restraint, and a sense of realism have reemerged in sports marketing. A case in point is the campaign for the Rutgers Athletic Department by DKB and Partners in Morristown, New Jersey.

The campaign—a series of print ads primarily for mall and transit posters complemented by radio spots and one TV commercial—started with a game plan that is a far cry from the lofty moralizing we have come to expect in sports marketing. DKB takes the more novel approach of blitzing established relationships, since the agency's philosophy acknowledges that "consumers already have a bank, a car, and a detergent. So, how do you get them to notice you, much less want you again? How do you break up the marriage?"

Start by acquainting consumers with the intended receiver, or in this case, the client, Rutgers Athletic Department. While Rutgers was not a new client to DKB, Kevin MacConnell, a newly appointed associate athletic director in charge of marketing, wanted the department to make a greater effort to showcase "the dedicated full sports program that is behind its athletes." The ads, then, were conceived in part as a recruiting mechanism for high school athletes who weren't drawn to the big state university's sports programs. In addition, by raising local awareness of sports events, the ads would bring in younger kids as a community of spectators, fans, and, of course, future athletes. Football and basketball are the two biggest sports programs at Rutgers, but the campaign also made a point of featuring soccer and baseball imagery. While this all-inclusive approach reflected an effort to reach the high school sports community, it also underscored the university's panoply of 30 teams and 17 sports.

From the outset, DKB chose the athlete's perspective as the point of view for the series. "We wanted to reach athletes by reflecting how a real athlete feels," says Jo Stapleton, creative group head at DKB and copywriter for the Rutgers campaign. "This is about the internal drive athletes have." The vignettes, then, are seen through the players' eyes—from the ground, through netting on the field, and at an oncoming ball. The strategy conveys a sense of action while pulling onlookers into the fray. "You're in the game, and the vantage point here is that of the participant," adds art director Brian Hagen. Indeed, the refrain in the TV and radio spots repeats a rhetorical Q&A designed to uncover the true colors of sports aficionados: "When do you know you're an athlete? When you can't stop playing."

Whatever realism is established, though, is undercut by the fact that the campaign's palette is red and black. The mascot for the assorted Rutgers teams is the Scarlet Knight, so DKB selected scarlet

"We wanted to reach athletes by reflecting how a real athlete feels. This is about the internal drive they have."

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1. Print ad for Rutgers University's sports programs. Art director: Brian Hagen; copywriter: Jo Stapleton.

2. TV spot for Rutgers' sports programs showing an athletics montage. Art director: Brian Hagen; copywriter: Jo Stapleton; producer: Hank Sagman. Production company: Open Frame Productions, New York; director: Kevin Jones.

50 SETS OF CRUNCHES.

40 SETS OF LUNGES.

30 LAPS.

THEN OFF TO PRACTICE.

Get into the game.



Home Field

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In spite of this—or possibly because of these newly tapped talents—the ads seem to have reached their target. When the TV spot runs during an ESPN game in the Rutgers broadcast market, the commercial holds its own against ads from megamanufacturers that may have been vastly more expensive. Kevin MacConnell attests to the success of the campaign with some vital statistics. In football, season ticket sales went up 25 percent in 1998 and 17 percent in 1999. The basketball program set records in 1998, both for single game attendances and for season ticket purchases. In 1999, season ticket sales rose a further 14 percent for men's hoops and 33 percent for women's.

Rejecting the oft-asserted claim that playing sports can be an elevated spiritual experience, DKB opts for a theme of straightforward athletic excellence and the grit necessary to achieve it. Not surprisingly, the resulting images—basic, direct, though not at the expense of elegance—make a compelling argument.