

GODWIN

Continued from Page 13

when they needed to communicate a message, create a brand, promote a product or idea or – until recently – a political candidate.

A decade ago, the state's economic development officials called on the full-service firm to present Mississippi's attributes in a presentation to Nissan ahead of the automaker's selection of Canton for a new plant. In 2005, in the wake of hurricane Katrina,



Mitchell

Godwin handled crisis management for Mississippi Power, Hancock Bank, Trustmark, BellSouth, CellularSouth, the Mississippi Department of Education, and others.

More recently, the Gulf Regional Tourism Partnership signed up the 56-employee GodwinGroup to create its destination advertising. That followed BP America's selection of Godwin as one of the first public relations firms to help enhance communications after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Recently retired Godwin chairman Danny Mitchell said awareness of their standing as the state's go-to firm has led partners and rank-and-file alike to take extra pains with each bit of work. "We have had the confidence of Mississippi's leaders," said Mitchell, the only advertising professional to be inducted into the Mississippi Business Hall of Fame, an honor that came in 2007.

Further, the confidence of state government, business and civic leaders has brought the firm a steady flow of referrals from outside Mississippi, said Mitchell, who joined Godwin in 1983 and became its president four years later and went on to serve as chairman/senior partner. Today, he carries the title senior counsel.

"We were always appreciative of the referrals and never wanted to let any of the leaders down."

The foundation for the sustained success, Mitchell said, "Is that we always knew that any great creative had to be found in great homework and research and marketing research. We never created for creative sake."

The company's view is that had Godwin not become the destination for Mississippi entities in need of communicating a message or establishing a brand, the agency most likely would not have survived its founder, George Godwin Sr., who started what was then the Dixie Advertising Agency in 1937. The senior Godwin died in 1967, approximately 10 years after the company had adopted the name GodwinGroup.

Philip Shirley, Mitchell's successor as chairman, said agencies typically have a 10- to 20-year lifespan. They rarely survive much beyond either the retirement or death of the founder, he said.

The reason: relationships.

"Longevity becomes difficult because relationships leave with the founder," Shirley said, and attributed GodwinGroup's lengthy life to Godwin Sr.'s emphasis on forging relationships with key government and business leaders across the state.



STEPHEN McDILL / The Mississippi Business Journal

Todd White with Godwin subsidiary NEON Marketing works on a commercial in the video editing suite. GodwinGroup produces TV spots for clients ranging from Baptist Health Systems to Mississippi Valley Gas.

The biggest banks, power and gas companies and insurance firms and the like discovered "they didn't need to go to New York, Chicago or Atlanta," Shirley said. "George Sr. had the vision to create a national resource right here in Mississippi."

Homework Comes First

Over the years Mississippians have witnessed the end product of Godwin's work such as Trustmark's slogan "People You Trust. Advice That Works!" and Baptist Health System's ubiquitous logo. But the process that leads to the catchy slogans and recognizable logos starts at a root level with research that identifies the audience or customer, the benefits to be gained from the product or service and the best way to deliver the message, said Shirley, whom Mitchell lured away from Luckie & Co. advertising agency in Birmingham in the late 1990s.

The reason for the deep digging doesn't change, Shirley said, but "how we identify that benefit, how we identify the audience, how we speak to the audience – that's new every day."

Time was, Shirley said, an ad agency could produce and place a television commercial on the local station that had the three most popular entertainment programs in the market. It came down to the belief that if you put enough information out there enough people would see it.

"Now, we have to talk to the individual separately," he added. "So we have to do a lot more contextual advertising."

You do that by talking to consumers and

listening to their responses.

"We had better be having that dialogue," he said. "They can tell us how we want you to deliver the new product, how much I am willing to pay, here's how convenient I want it..."

It's a long journey from the product and audience research to the "war room," where the creative work begins, said Shirley, who likens the process to a duck on the water. The observer sees a duck seeming to float effortlessly on the surface while below the duck is paddling furiously.

"Below, we're paddling as fast as we can to bundle together the whole package of communication – the exact right person with exactly the right message."

GodwinGroup, the chairman said, is "very specific process-oriented. There is nothing random about how we work."

Clients' perspectives

Ginger Cocke and Will McKee have more than careers in the medical field in common. Both are marketing executives who rely on GodwinGroup to help frame how the public views their companies, Baptist Health Systems in Cocke's case and MedjetAssist (medical evacuation) in McKee's.

Birmingham-based Medjet chose Godwin in 2006 after reviewing a full slate of agencies, including ones in Birmingham. "Godwin had the best presentation and the most creative ideas," said McKee, Medjet's marketing manager, in an email.

In the years since, the firm's ideas and services have kept Medjet's marketing strategies "above the curve," going "far

SERVICES

Continued from Page 13

the onset of the Great Recession in early 2008. Godwin certainly felt the blow, CEO Shirley said. "We fell off a cliff in May of 2008.

"The second quarter of '08 is when ad budgets got cut all over the country. A lot of our accounts were in a position to spend only a half or a third of what they normally spent."

The firm cut close to 20 positions, though not all of the positions had people in them.

Work volume rose as revenues dropped. "That's why 2008 and 2009 were so painful to us," Shirley said. "The work went way up and the money went down."

Everything had to work right to deliver value for the dollar, the CEO said. "We had to redouble our efforts... We had to make sure the clients survived and they came out of it strong."

The effort paid off, Shirley said. "They have appreciated it. The ones who are now turning it around remember that.

"That's why the last two years have been outstanding for us."

The privately held GodwinGroup reported sales of \$14.5 million in 2011, according to the Mississippi Business Journal's 2012 "Book of Lists."

The rebound led the company last year to renovate and refurnish its suite of offices that take up the entire eighth floor of One Jackson Place in downtown Jackson.

As the recession receded, one lesson became clear:

An economic slump is the worst time to quit advertising, Shirley said.

"The companies that continue their aggressive advertising come out of it quicker and gain enormous market share when it does turn around."

And the recession's lesson for Godwin? "Be a good partner," he said.

— Ted Carter

beyond what most traditional agencies even think about," he said.

"Their New Media and Web 2.0 team is an invaluable resource to me as a marketing manager," McKee said. "The creativity and intelligence of the team makes for a unique combination that is hard to find."

On the relationship side, "the entire team that works on our account feels like family," he added.

Baptist Health Systems' Cocke has worked with Godwin for 17 of the hospital company's 30 years with the ad agency. "They certainly have been creative all of this time," said Cocke, marketing director.

The creative work reflects significant preparation and homework, Cocke said. "I think they do a lot of research. For me, they do a lot of focus groups. They test the messages and see which ones work... how much the consumer understands."

At 100-years-old, Baptist Health Systems has had only three logos. Godwin designed two of those, the last one in 1997, Cocke said.

"They did a great deal of work on it," she added. To settle on a design, "we went through the whole gamut. I will tell you this one has stood the test of time."

The same could be said of Godwin.