If everything else were equal, would you be willing to have a contract swing on the appearance of your stationery or business card? A signed contract, of course, hinges on considerably more than the image your company projects. Although your firm's appearance as projected on letterheads and business cards won't get a signature on a dotted line, it may prevent you from seeing a decision maker, so that you won't even get an opportunity to bid or quote.

An overstatement you think? If you agree that first impressions in business are important, consider this: your prospective customer will usually form his first impression of you and your company when he sees your firm's stationery or business card: And, the odds are that he will see the letterhead or card before he sees you!

Stationery (that includes letterheads and envelopes) as well as business cards occupy an unusual—and critical—spot in your firm's pattern of successful growth. They are a communications tool, advertising medium, public relations technique, direct mail device, and point-of-sale presentation aid... all rolled into one. Unless you're a highly sophisticated marketer, you have no more flexible marketing communications tool than your stationery and business cards.

Find an Objective and Keep It
Like everything else you spend business dollars for, the development of business cards and stationery should have an objective. The general objective of cards and letterheads is to project the image of the position in the marketplace that your company wants to attain or keep. The specific objective is to make a positive visual and written statement about the kind of company you own or represent.
For example, if your firm has been doing business for many years in a single geographic area and is widely known, it’s generally not necessary to list on a letterhead or business card all the various types of services you perform or types of products carried. That kind of information is best reserved for brochures. Simply carrying the name, address, and phone number (or numbers) on your letterhead should be sufficient to establish who you are and what you do.

On the other hand, if your company is a new one just beginning to carve a niche for itself, the simple name “L. D. Smith, Contractors” isn’t enough. In this case it’s far better to use two or three descriptive words to identify yourself. For example, “L. D. Smith, Inc., Drywall Contractors.” Normally the descriptive words should not be on the same line as the name of your firm.

Use cards and stationery that are best suited for the market you want to penetrate. As a contractor, for example, if you normally sub-contract to well-known “design & build” firms, you may wish to have stationery that’s less aggressive than if you did renovation work with small building owners or homeowners. The reason for this is that decision makers in larger companies seem to identify their own lower-key approach with a lower-key approach from people with whom they will do business. Consumers and small business decision makers tend to identify with the more aggressive, informative approach. Another reason for this difference is that the folks who make the decisions in bigger companies (larger commercial accounts) generally know which firms have the resources to service them best. They tend (sometimes unfairly) not to consider smaller operations. Consumers and small businesspeople tend to shop looking not only for the best price, but also for someone they can trust. If your card or letterhead says what you do, this helps identify you better and is one step in learning to trust you.

Think of keeping to your objective this way . . . don’t overwhelm a small company marketplace with stationery and cards that say “expensive”; similarly, don’t overwhelm large prospective buyers with stationery or cards that imply “we don’t have the horses to do the job for you.” Your firm’s objective comes first. Your stationery should be designed to fit it—and not the other way around.

Use—Design—Cost
In far too many cases the design of stationery and business cards enjoys a feast or famine. Both overin- you do, this helps identify you better and is one step in learning to trust you.

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Use—Design—Cost
In far too many cases the design of stationery and business cards enjoys a feast or famine. Both overin- dulging and undernourishment can kill you. This feast or famine happens when you abdicate responsibility for all three elements in developing cards and stationery. These elements are the use, design, and cost of letterheads, envelopes, and business cards. They’re all related to each other, but each could and should be split apart for your own guidance to see if you’re on the right track. To help you further, here are a series of questions to ask yourself about how your cards and stationery will be used . . .

Use Element :
- How will general stationery be used? General correspondence? Sales use? Pre-call letters? Billing? (In general, billheads should be used for invoicing and statements, not letterheads.)
- Who will use the stationery? Officers of the company? Sales staff and company officers? All members of the firm writing to those outside the company? Members of the firm writing to each other? (Discourage use of corporate stationery for internal memo writing. Far less expensive stationery is in order.)
- How will business cards be used? Identification of corporate officers? Identification of sales representatives? Sales aid by salespeople? Attached to direct mail? Attached to brochures?
- Who will use the business cards? Corporate officers? Sales manager and sales representatives? Professional/managerial members of your company? All employees who must regularly deal with customers? (Keep in mind that there are no hard and fast rules . . . there are only busi-ness objectives and business needs.)

Design Element
Nowhere is the “feast or famine” situation more common than in the design element of your stationery and cards. The temptation is to either turn it all over to a skilled design artist or studio, or just turn it over to the printer. If you’re presently working with an artist or public relations firm, you’ll find that they can be of great help. Should you be satisfied with your present stationery and cards, then simply ordering a new order from your printer will be no problem at all. The problem, of course, is when you’re doing a major re-design job.

There are two aspects involved here to achieve the design element you need to reach your objective: overall graphics and typography. General layout, readability, and copy elements are included in graphics. Typography is the art form (Continued on page 20)
of taking precisely the right kind of type face to put across and reinforce the graphics. Together they provide the overall image and impact in keeping with your goals.

Your better bet is to consult with an artist, art studio, or public relations/marketing firm. They will have the imagination, knowledge, and skill to work with you. Be sure to look at several different approaches to the design you want. Have them set up on the letterheads, envelopes, and business cards in the actual size they will be printed. This is a good precaution to take because what may look fine on an oversized “mock-up” may look horribly cluttered in life size.

Stock, colors, inks, and logos should all be taken into consideration. The word “stock” simply refers to the type of paper on which cards and letterheads should be printed. One school of thought holds that you can use any color stock you want . . . so long as its white. Another says simply use any color stock. The use of color on a letterhead has a very powerful affect. Whatever color stock you use keep these factors in mind . . .

- Are you better off using a white stock and imprinting one or two colors?
- Will the color stock you select be sufficiently pale to keep what is typed on it highly legible?
- When a color is used, will it highlight or clash with any existing colors presently associated with your firm?
- If you select a colored stock, will it be available from a paper supply house two years from now—or is it a “fad” color that won’t be produced in the future?
  (Some basic stock colors will always be with us, but some may not be available except by special—that means expensive—order.)

Build an element of color into the inks selected; don’t simply stay with black. Additional colors are somewhat more expensive; however, two colors on a colored paper stock give a three-color effect that can really build impact. Bear in mind that multiple colors can also give a “circusy” effect that may not be appropriate to your prospective clients.

One more word about stocks. The most common type of letterhead stock is known as 25% rag content bond with a vellum finish. It has a good “feel”, takes ink well, and is an easy paper on which to type or write. There are all kinds weights of paper as well as finishes. It would be wise to steer away from some of the more exotic finishes . . . such as hand finished or leatherette. These may look unusually attractive—and some even take printer’s ink unusually well—but they are the very devil to use in a typewriter. If you’re unsure, simply ask for sample sheets and have your secretary type on them. If she’s unhappy with the paper it is guaranteed that you will be, too.

Another aspect that can improve the impact of your letterheads or business cards is a logo. Simply stated, a logo is a shorthand way of identifying your company. Sometimes they’re called service marks. A logo may be a set of initials (GM for General Motors is a prime example). Or it may be a symbol. The stylized bell in a circle is the logo for The Bell System of telephone companies. There’s nothing really magic in a logo. Ask yourself if you really need one (they can be quite expensive to design). The type face in which your company name is spelled out should be so distinctive that a logo may be nothing more than gilding the lily. If you presently have a logo, be sure to feature it . . . especially on your business cards. For a little extra glamour (and about 10% to 15% more in cost) you may want to heat treat your cards and letterheads so that the entire surface of the logo is raised, paper and all. You may even want to update the appearance of the logo itself. Be careful here, though, because this can cost a considerable amount of money. Not simply in
the design, but also in the amount of advertising you must do to establish a new “image” for your company. There’s nothing inexpensive about creating a new image. If you’re in the middle of doing so, then you realize that the least expensive item is the stationery.

Cost Element

There’s no other way to say this: the cost of stationery is going up at an incredible rate. There was a general 7% increase in January of this year. There will probably be another increase in mid-1978, and again in early 1979. The cost of paper has gone from a relatively minor factor in the printing process to a major factor within the space of two years. Be prepared for it. And also be prepared for the unusually high cost of finished envelopes.

If there’s a good time to buy printing and paper stock it’s now, before the next increase slated sometime in May or June of the year. Avoid “mill close outs.” That simply means the paper stock you’re buying now for printing won’t be available after July of the year. Make sure your printer isn’t buying that kind of bargain on your behalf. It’s no bargain when next year rolls around.

Business Cards

In their own way business cards can be far more important to you than all the rest of your stationery. At the end of a year they will be far more widely distributed than your letterheads. In most cases they will be given out in selling situations. Most business cards are printed on what’s known as Bristol card stock. They come in all shapes and sizes these days, though the most common is a 2½” by 3” white card. All the rules about colors and readability apply to business cards as they do to letterhead. . . only more so. Space is limited.

In recent years business cards have been over-sized, printed on metal and plastic, imprinted with photos, engraved, provided with raised letters, and heat-treated to raise entire sections of the card.

The most effective cards contain the following elements: the name, address, and phone number of the person presenting the card; the name of the company; the logo (if appropriate) of the company; and use more than a single color on something other than plain white Bristol stock.

To answer the age old question, “What is featured prominently, the name of the card’s holder or the company?” . . . the company.

Definitely feature prominently the name of your firm, even if you’re the president. A business card is not designed to be an ego trip, but a tool to help the business grow.

Factors to Keep in Mind

These are the factors to keep in mind when designing or redesigning your stationery or business cards . . .

1. Cards and stationery should

(Continued on page 25)
HAVE CARD: WILL BUILD

(Continued from page 21)

you will project your image to the marketplace in your stationery and business cards.

The ultimate test, as was indicated before, of whether you’re happy with your present stationery or cards is this: everything else being equal, would you be confident if your getting a contract hinged on the appearance of your business cards, letterhead, and envelopes?

If the answer is no, it’s time you did something about it.

(Editors Note: Henry Holtzman is a nationally known writer on business image and promotion subjects.)