

## Leading With a Good Line

Terry Slaughter and Norma Hanson throw a one-two punch that has won the young ad agency both prestigious accounts and creative acclaim.

BY MELANIE LEMAY

Terry Slaughter is talking to John Harbert on the phone. While he talks, Slaughter shifts his body uncomfortably. He's confined in his rumpled suit, even confined by the big conference room chair. When Harbert asks for Slaughter's fax number, Slaughter bolts from the room like a child out of school. "Our fax number—" The phrase echoes as he strides through the hallways in the far reaches of the building, looking for someone who knows. "I need our fax number..." Miraculously, he is back; he's written the fax number on his hand with a blue pen. He reads the numbers to Harbert in a deep voice.

"That man is the salt of the earth," Slaughter exclaims as he hangs up the phone. "Can you believe it—I was sitting there on the phone crossing out copy with John Harbert." Like a keyed-up little boy in disguise,

Slaughter's eyes dance with excitement. His words tumble out, passionate and funny and honest.

The older woman beside him smiles, indulgent and affectionate. She is Norma Hanson, Slaughter's business partner for nine years, and the gatekeeper for Terry Slaughter's creative exuberance. Together they are running an award-winning advertising agency, good enough to compete with the big guns all over the country.

"Yes," he says. "I look at the world differently... I love the world. I look at it the same way I did when I was 12. I hope I never lose that, and I hope that people in this agency never lose that. There's some little boy in me and some little girl in Norma. There's a certain innocence in the way I look at the world... I don't think I've been jaundiced...."

"I'm not smart," says this man whose creative work has won national Addys in competition against Madison Avenue giants and has swept the Birmingham Addy competition for the past four



*Terry Slaughter and Norma Hanson produce advertising that is long on exuberance and creativity. The bicycle is in Slaughter's office.*

go back to my hometown—Dothan—and get some experience with an agency there.”

Soon Slaughter's individuality raised its insistent head. "I didn't like working for somebody else. I was young, and thought I knew everything. I went out on my own, and I will say I did some really outstanding creatives. I used photographers and typesetters and printers from all over the country...really believed in using the best. If a project had a \$5,000 budget, I'd use four of it on photography. Pretty soon I had stacks of bills, and I guess I thought if I just kept on doing good work, they'd somehow get paid.

"It got so bad I contemplated going bankrupt, but I just couldn't do it. Dallas was still offering me a job, and I knew I could take it and pay my bills off that way, but that seemed like the easy way out. I really wanted to stay and work my way out of the mess I'd gotten into. As soon as I made that decision, God seemed to step in and make it even better. Norma came up to me at church one day and introduced herself and said she thought she could help me."

It was 1980, and Norma Hanson was getting restless. She'd left her early advertising career to raise two daughters. Now she wanted to come back. "I looked at Terry Slaughter's portfolio and I knew I could sell his work anywhere," she says.

Hanson gave Slaughter what he needed most. Her time. "Norma didn't invest any money in the business when we started. Instead, she set out to promote my work and straighten out the administrative mess. We went into partnership, and we worked hard, and paid back every dime I owed. We had suppliers who thought I was the greatest guy in the world because I didn't go bankrupt and I managed to pay them back. Those suppliers have been loyal to us ever since."

They set up shop in Dothan, using the old grocery warehouse building which had belonged to Norma's grandfather. "My grandparents came over here from Lebanon to see relatives in Savannah and Ozark. While they were here, my grandfather rode into Dothan and saw that it didn't have a grocery wholesaler. They decided to stay. My grandfather set up a fruit stand, which later evolved into a little grocery store. Eventually he was a supplier, operating out of a big old building right on the railroad tracks where they could load the wagons with produce right off the train. The old building was restored and we used it for our office."

Rooted in Dothan as they were, Hanson nevertheless found Birmingham a more fertile ground for clients. They opened a small Birmingham office, then moved to a bigger one. "In nine years,

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we gradually moved the bulk of our operations up to Birmingham," Hanson says. "Today we have 18 people in Birmingham and only 4 in Dothan." Their growth resulted in still another move last year—this time to a converted warehouse on Morris Avenue which bears an eerie resemblance to the Dothan office. "I get chills when I hear a train go by outside," Hanson says.

Their success in Birmingham is due, in large part, to their emphasis on high quality execution for Slaughter's ideas. "We're not for everyone," Hanson says. "If a client doesn't want to make a statement with his advertising—or solve his problem in a creative way—we're not interested. We're interested in working with people who want quality work done."

Hanson maintains an apartment on Southside and spends several days each week in the Birmingham office. She divides her time between active professional and social lives in Dothan and Birmingham. "I really have the best of both worlds," Hanson says. "At this stage in my life, I'm getting to do something exciting and worthwhile. I have homes in two cities, and family, and friends."

For Slaughter, the four-hour commute between Dothan and Birmingham became a burden, especially when his wife had twin daughters, born premature seven months ago. He solved the problem by moving the entire family to Birmingham last January. "It was time," Hanson says. "Probably 95 percent of our business comes out of Birmingham now."

Not a bad record of growth for an agency that gives out T-shirts as its only promotional material. Each is emblazoned with one of Slaughter Hanson's mottos, adapted—complete with vintage pictures from old scouting books... "The Extra Mile," "Aim High," "Self-Starting," "In the Trenches."

Although the agency is growing, Slaughter still seems to be in no danger of becoming a jaundiced ad man. In conjunction with the AmSouth account, he recently flew aboard a private jet throughout the region for meetings. "I walked right off the plane into one meeting, looking like the corporate executive with my briefcase and all..."

"I walked into the conference room and they were all waiting, as if I were somebody important...The first thing I said when I sat down was, 'You can't be from Dothan and be slick. I know I just flew in on a plane, but that doesn't make me slick. I'm just as impressed as you are.' Everybody laughed and started to gather around." Then he said it.

"We're not slick, but we're good."

Leave it to an ad man to lead with a good line. **B**

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