



Rod Roodenburg and David Coates of Ion Design put a twist on traditional pro bono work

Creating for a cause

Wanting to focus its pro bono efforts, Ion Design of Vancouver developed a contest to combat environmental destruction

WANTED: One good idea for achieving global sustainability. The prize? Twenty-five thousand dollars worth of strategy and creative services to get that idea out to the world. That, in a nutshell, is what Vancouver-based Ion Design announced back in February when it launched the One Good Idea competition. Three months later it revealed the winner, Montreal's Sustainability Solutions Group.

Pinning down what the winning idea is, it seems, is a bit trickier. "Their idea is basically a call for social change regarding climate change," says David Coates, who co-founded Ion with Rod Roodenburg in 1988. SSG's Geneva Guerin is equally reticent. "It involves creating a new cultural norm around taking action on climate change," she says, with a knowing laugh. Admittedly, by press time for this issue the

two companies had only held preliminary discussions on the project but adds Roodenburg, "We're keeping it a bit vague so we're not pigeonholed into a particular solution. That's how we typically work."

Ultimately, the goal is to produce a brand mark for sustainability, something akin to the "three R" Mobius loop recycling symbol, with a twist on the Canadian government's 1970s ParticipAction healthy

PHOTO BY DAVID ELLINGSEN

lifestyle program thrown in. Whatever it ends up being, “If we do our job right it will become a global marker for changing people’s habits,” says Coates.

The principles behind Ion have been collaborating since Coates and Roodenburg were students at the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design, working on projects for clients like the B.C.-based Wilderness Society while completing their fourth-year studies. “By the time we graduated it just seemed natural to start a business together,” says Coates.

“Do you want to be a leech? Or can you find it in yourself to inspire, change or help others in a meaningful way?”

Over the years, the six-member Ion team has worked for clients as diverse as the Canada Post Corporation – they designed a stylized beaver stamp celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada – the BC Film Commission, high-end restaurants, architectural firms, and the founders’ alma mater, in a variety of media, including a recently completed signage project for North Vancouver parks. (“It’s pretty cool,” says Roodenburg. “You jump a stump on your mountain bike and you land right in front of one of your interpretive signs.”)

The founders have also been very active in their community; both have held executive positions with the GDC and are strong supporters of cultural programs and eco-friendly projects.

“We’ve done a lot of pro bono work [but] there’s never really been a focus to it. We thought we’d combine the rough value that we do in a year into one worthwhile project that we could sink our teeth into and have a little more impact,” says Coates, of the rationale behind the competition.

Donating time to cultural and social organizations has always been a part of Ion’s mandate, explains Roodenburg. “To our way of thinking, if you aren’t contributing to society at some level right now, then you should start thinking real hard about the legacy you are leaving behind. Do you want

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Promo pieces for Ion's sustainability contest

to be a leech? Or can you find it in yourself to inspire, change or help others in a meaningful way?"

A year in the making – and somewhat trumped by billionaire Brit Richard Branson's announcement of a \$25 million prize for green ideas just days before the One Good Idea launch – the contest drew a dozen entries, with several promising and intriguing ideas. (One proposed the creation of a repository network of good news stories to try and counteract negativity in the media. Another suggested audits to calculate – and reduce – ecological footprints on a family-by-family basis.)

In the end though, "The winner was a clear winner," says Halifax-based Dean McNeill, president of the GDC and one of the three contest judges. (The other two – Dr. Freda Pagani, founder and past director of the University of British Columbia's sustainability office, and Michael Mucha, director of public works for the city of Olympia in Washington State – are located on the West Coast, so the judging was done remotely via a website set up by Ion.) "[SSG] had some solid thinking and plans for how they could go about it, and how they could motivate and integrate other groups to do their part," adds McNeill.

Coates agrees: "[SSG's] proposal was really well thought-out and well-written. They'd really given it a lot of thought to what [Ion's] role would be and how they would follow through [on it]."

SSG's Geneva Guerin admits "we've been evolving the idea for a while. We saw this competition as a perfect opportunity for us to push the thought to its completion and engage a partner to help us actualize it."

Ion and SSG hope to launch the sustainability mark in October.

So, will there be a second annual One Good Idea contest?

"Absolutely. We'd love to see others do this type of thing. Maybe down the road we'll partner with other firms. There's lots of potential for it," says Coates.

All that's needed are some more good ideas.

– Allan Britnell