

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## A quirky path to success

Graphic design firm Nesnadny + Schwartz combines a winning style with an offbeat touch

By MARCIA PLEDGER

Just a couple of years out of college, Mark Schwartz and Joyce Nesnadny were laid off from their jobs, victims of budget cuts during the Reagan administration.

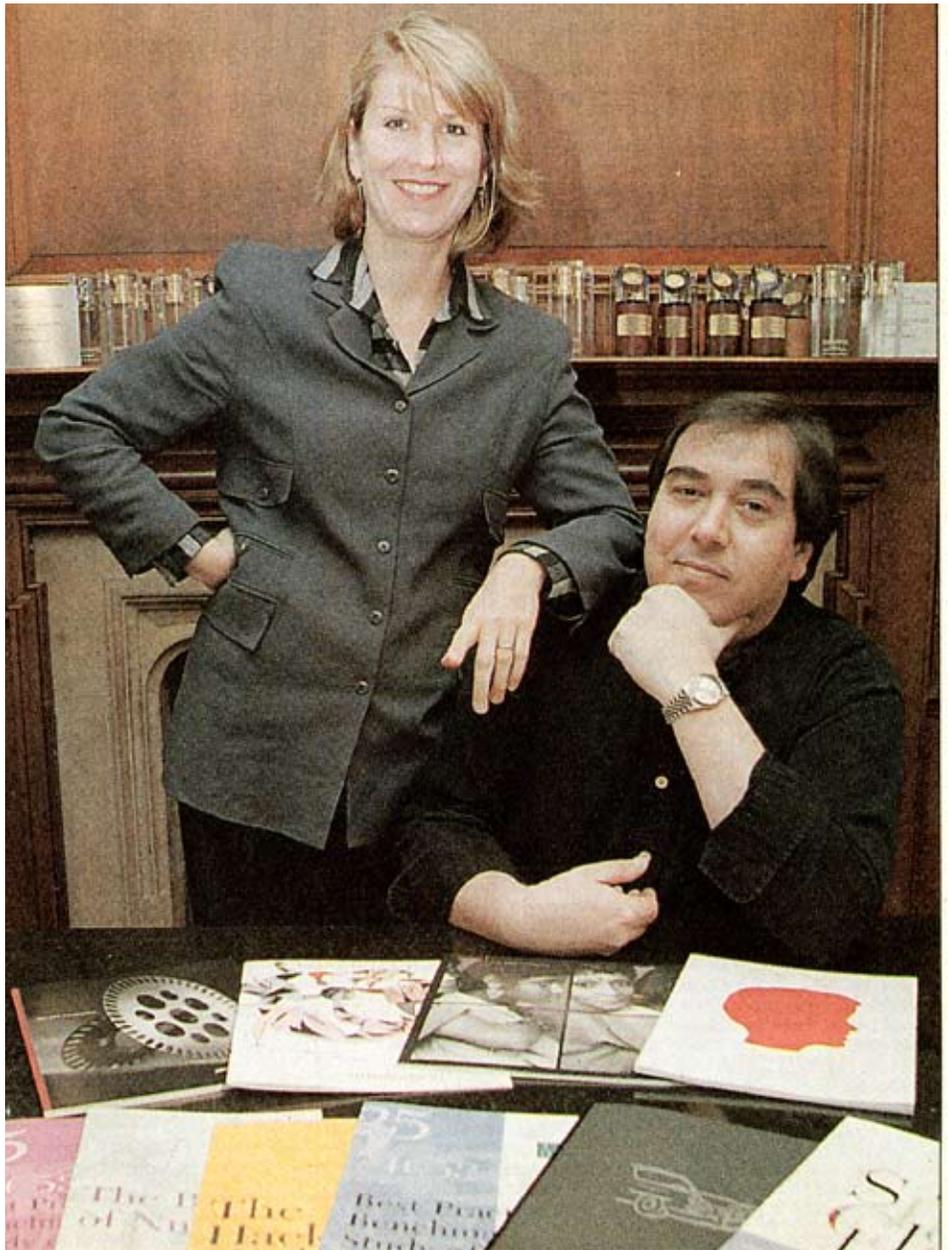
At the time, Nesnadny was a designer at the Regional Transit Authority, and Schwartz was teaching photography at Cleveland State University. The former couple and longtime partners had been working on free-lance projects together since they were fine arts students at Ohio University, so going on their own seemed a natural evolution.

Today, Nesnadny + Schwartz is one of the hottest graphic design firms in Ohio, with an impressive list of corporate and institutional clients ranging from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum to LTV Corp. and Matrix Essentials Inc.

The firm has received hundreds of industry awards, but dominating the Cleveland ADDY awards two weeks ago with 10 top-place finishes said the eight-person firm, with \$1.9 million in billings, had arrived.

Boutique graphic design/advertising firms such as Nesnadny + Schwartz are increasingly capturing big corporate business as companies outsource such work, said Rick Squire, executive director of the Cleveland Advertising Association.

The partners credit much of their early success to an absolute lack of professional experience.



Joyce Nesnadny and Mark Schwartz head an eight-person graphic design firm that's grown from an attic-based business to a leading Ohio firm with close to \$2 million in annual billings.

Their break came in 1983 after Schwartz called Peter Lewis, chairman and chief executive officer of Progressive Corp. in Mayfield Heights, about taking pictures for the property-casualty insurance company's annual report.

After talking to Lewis, they became interested in creating the entire annual report - ambitious thinking, considering the two didn't even have business cards, not to mention a portfolio, except for some nonprofit work.

During a meeting with Lewis and his staff, the executive was called away for a phone call.

"That's when we were really grilled by the staff about our capabilities," said Schwartz, 39. "I

remember being asked at least 10 times, 'What annual reports have you done?' We continually answered by not answering. Then the chief financial officer said, 'So you have no experience.'

At that moment, Lewis returned and without getting a sense of what was going on, told the young partners they had the job.

"He said, 'I like you. You found a way to get in here. You're young. You're aggressive, and I think you'll do a good job,'" Schwartz said. "That was it. That was the beginning."

Lewis no longer recalls the details so vivid to Schwartz. "I do remember [that] Mark doesn't take no for an answer, and I like that in a person," Lewis



This year, Eaton Corp.'s annual report sports a more contemporary look, designed by Nesnadny + Schwartz graphic firm.

said recently. "Some people find that hard to deal with, but I happen to like that. They've done our annual report for 13 years, and they keep getting better."

Progressive's offbeat annual reports all have a fine-arts edge that merges the talents of the designers, the text of the client and artwork from some of the nation's finest artists. Since the late 1970s, the company has commissioned artists to create new works for its annual reports. Nesnadny and Schwartz billed only \$3,600 for that first job.

"Progressive has made its way on the shoulders of young people with talent who only need a chance to prove themselves," Lewis said. "The second year it was easier to choose them than the first. Now, it would be very hard to change."

Nesnadny + Schwartz has made a conscious effort to link the artistic expression to the business of Progressive. "What we've tried to do is have the art mirror the innovative and creative ways that Progressive does business," Schwartz said.

Clients and professionals in related fields who

have worked with the graphic firm say the duo's strengths and weaknesses complement each other. In the end, they produce quality and creative work on time and within budget.

Nesnadny and Schwartz were romantically involved for many years until the mid-1980s, when Nesnadny went to Yale University to pursue her master's degree in graphic design. Both are now married to other people, but still it's a feat to have weathered a breakup while continually growing the business. "We've both been nominated for sainthood," Schwartz said jokingly.

For the last four years, Nesnadny's home base and office has been in Toronto. Although she often visits, she primarily stays in contact via computer, telephone and Federal Express. The rest of the firm, whose members have an average age of 34, works out of a post-Victorian, slate-blue mansion with 28 rooms in the middle of University Circle.

"We know each other so well, so there are no surprises," Nesnadny said of her partner. "We

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**Graphic design firm  
has a winning style**

certainly argue or disagree about things, but it's a healthy disagreement. We push each other. We don't let each other stagnate."

The firm has hardly been sluggish. Except for their formative years, the team has not solicited work, preferring to work for companies and institutions that have searched them out because of a respect for what they do.

Stephen Hardis, new chairman and chief executive officer of Eaton Corp., hired the firm because he wanted a more contemporary look with an emphasis on technology for the company's annual report. The work of Nesnadny + Schwartz and an out-of-state firm continually stood out from a large pile. With other things being equal, Hardis decided to go with the local firm, especially when he learned they created the George Gund Foundation's annual report, one he had admired.

Previous annual reports were traditional efforts featuring employees with machinery and Eaton products. This year, the report has a futuristic look, a drastic departure for the \$7 billion Cleveland manufacturing firm.

"I haven't seen the final product, but to date I'm absolutely delighted," Hardis said. "Mark understood very quickly what we wanted to do and responded. He brought in the work of a half dozen photographers and asked us to go through them. Based on that, he hired a photographer."

The Cleveland Institute of Art has won many awards for a recruitment package created by Nesnadny + Schwartz.

"Their work is just quirky enough to make it exciting," said Ted Sherron, vice president of the institute, adding that any brochures, literature, or posters they send out have to be creative because it's coming from an art school.

So far, the biggest stretch and challenge for the group has been the 90 different components designed for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum's grand opening, including invitations, posters, banners and merchandise. During the two-month period that preceded the event, Schwartz said he felt the firm needed a drive-through window to handle the volume. For some items, the group got as little as 24-hour notice to produce.

"For all that work, it was a remarkable experience to be standing in the middle of Cleveland Municipal Stadium with all of our staff seeing thousands and thousands of people wearing T-shirts and hats that we had designed," Schwartz said. "The entire event, including our work, was being beamed out all over the world on HBO."