

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## MY BIGGEST MISTAKE



## Firm was in awe of Seagram, but just had to walk away

*By Mark Schwartz, as told to Plain Dealer reporter Marcia Pledger*

**W**e've always been in a unique position in the Cleveland market, getting a lot of awards and national attention for our work in visual communications. But when the Seagram Co. called us, we were in awe.

It's a company that I had always admired, and not for their liquor. I run a graphic design firm, and I've always been intrigued by the company's art collection, the architecture at its headquarters in

New York and its commitment to contemporary photography. We had never moved in those circles. To be considered to design the Seagram annual report was a great honor.

We had been in business for 13 years when they first contacted us in 1993, but we were still a small design firm with 10 employees. We quickly learned we were up against three of the biggest and best design firms in the world, including the company that previously had the multimillion-dollar contract.

All of a sudden, we were thrown into an arena that was dazzling.

### ... AND HOW I FIXED IT

**Company:** Nesnadny + Schwartz

**President/Creative Director:**

Mark Schwartz

**Founded:** 1981

**Headquarters:** Cleveland

**Employees:** 19

Luxury goods involve a different culture. We had not sought out the work, but we certainly responded and pursued the account aggressively. After three months of meetings, memos, drafts, writing, designing, plane trips and presentations, we landed the job.

# MISTAKE

FROM E1

## Firm just had to walk away

Our biggest mistake turned out to be working for people who had a total lack of respect for our company, our staff and what we do. We learned the hard way that the grass is not always greener when you land a dream account.

Pursuing and winning the work was intense but exhilarating. It involved showing Seagram unique and compelling visuals and proving we could service the account, even though we had produced nearly 100 annual reports up to that point.

It also involved assuring the client that Nesnadny + Schwartz could meet the criteria for the design excellence by committing resources from our Cleveland, Toronto and New York offices. It even involved dealing with troubling behavior by our competitors, which were not awarded this engagement.

It was a different league, for sure.

But all that trouble paled in comparison to what we were headed for. Edgar Bronfman Jr., Seagram's president, was a prince to work with. But we only met with him six times. However, the people we had to work with in communications were monsters. They asked for version after version. They felt they owned us because it was a \$4 million account. We would have meetings in luxurious places. At first it was interesting. When you're putting together an annual report, you have to learn as much as possible about a company's business. But after awhile, enough was enough. How much information do you need to do your job?

We would get summoned at the last minute to ridiculous

meetings where nothing would get accomplished. It was just a drone of useless information. You couldn't help but think, this is not rocket science. You guys sell liquor.

I started questioning why it was necessary to hold meetings in luxury suites in New York's finest hotels, especially 10 blocks from the Seagram building. One time we had to sit through a two-day conference on one of their brands, Tropicana Orange Juice. In the end, it's still just orange juice.

You don't mind going to meetings when they make sense and help you to achieve your objectives. Unfortunately, the vast majority of meetings we went to for this client were a total waste of time.

The level of waste in terms of money and time was incomprehensible to us. It was a different world. It wasn't all bad, for sure, including the perks. Holiday gifts from Seagram took the form of cases and cases of several brands of liquor that they sent to all three of our locations including \$300 bottles of Cognac.

We really thought we wanted to work with this client. But it reminds me of the question, What does the dog do when he finally catches the car? Part of every project includes managing the client and the process. But we never had control of this client and it's not that we didn't try. It was like talking to a blank wall.

Before we got this job, we had worked with all sorts of clients, both large corporations and institutional accounts. Never had I had an experience that caused me restless and sometimes sleepless nights. It was tough on the staff. My partner and I had lots of arguments, and we started neglecting other accounts.

It wasn't an easy decision. But after two months, we decided to fire

the Seagram Co. On top of everything we had only invoiced them \$200,000 when we made that decision. We walked away from nearly \$4 million, with the realization that life was too short. For matters of survival, we needed to end this relationship.

If you do fire a client, make sure you do it publicly. It's very healthy. We sent all of our staff a copy of the resignation letter. It was an affirmation to them that they mattered more to us.

The Seagram Co. annual report was not right for us. If we were a huge firm, we could have sent account executives to those pointless meetings. But we're small by choice. I've always felt that the best way to do creative work is by listening to the decision-makers firsthand and not have the information filtered through anyone.

We never want to be that big. We just want to be great.

I'm proud of who we are and the direction that Nesnadny + Schwartz is heading. We've been in business for 25 years. Our first client is just two doors away, University Circle Inc. Progressive Insurance has been a client for 24 years, the George Gund Foundation for 19 years, Eaton Corp. for 13 years. We've done major projects for British Petroleum, Cleveland Clinic, Columbia University, Hearst Corp., International Spy Museum, Johnson & Johnson, Planned Parenthood Foundation, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, and Vassar College.

At the end of the day, happiness and respect don't have a price.