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The art of selecting art for businesses

Posted: 6:45 am Thu, February 14, 2013

By Nancy Crotti

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The University of Minnesota's Amplatz Children's Hospital in Minneapolis has a different color scheme for each floor and a different animal mascot for each clinical unit. Artwork on the sixth floor, pictured, has a rainforest theme. (Staff photos: Bill Klotz)

Major corporations used to employ curators to manage their art collections. Those days are long past, and companies large and small often feel flat-footed when it comes to selecting art for their offices.

Two Twin Cities art consultants said they first interview a company's decision-makers to determine what they want to accomplish by adding or changing artwork.

They study each space and present different scenarios before making initial recommendations on particular pieces. The art may include framed posters, photographs, original paintings, fabric pieces or sculptures by locally or nationally known artists.

They also need to know how much companies want to spend. Companies that are remodeling or moving may focus so much on the construction and furniture budget that they don't consider the cost of art.

Some tie art expenses into their marketing budget because companies these days tend to select art based on the impression they want to make, according to Leslie Palmer-Ross, director of art services for Corporate Art Force in northeast Minneapolis.

"Typically the art that we're doing for a company is the lobby, conference rooms, some corridors, maybe a lunch room, and typically most of the money is spent in the public areas or in the client areas," Palmer-Ross said. "What is being spent per piece goes down typically as you go down to the straight employee areas."

Art consultants are realistic about this particularly since the recession.

"Art is looked at as a luxury," Palmer-Ross acknowledged. "Even though those of us in the business don't think of it that way and understand the importance and the power of it, we know that people say, 'Are we going to buy computers or are we going to buy artwork?'"

One of Palmer-Ross' clients, NorthRock Partners, is a private wealth advisory practice of Ameriprise Financial Services. The firm moved to the 15th floor of the Capella Tower complex at 650 Third Ave. S. in Minneapolis two years ago.

"We wanted our space to look really nice, top-notch" for clients and employees, said Jim Lund, senior vice president of NorthRock.

The firm went with a rock theme consistent with its name to convey a sense of stability, supplemented by period photos of Minneapolis for an appreciation of place, according to Lund. NorthRock spent \$70,000 on the art, most of which was photography.

"It took about six months. They gave us time to think about it," he said. "I think it has to be a collaborative process and an iterative process."

Sarah Balk McGrill of McGrill Art Associates, Minneapolis, treads carefully in approaching clients about how much they can spend.

"I don't ever make them feel bad about their budgets," she said. "It's what are they trying to accomplish and what budget are they trying to accomplish it with?"

She also tries to put them at ease about the process of choosing art and deciding where to place it.

"It can be intimidating," McGrill said. "When they realize that it's not scary and that it's fun, they're like, 'Oh, yea! The art lady is here!'"

Much of McGrill's work lately has been in health care, including the art for the University of Minnesota's Amplatz Children's Hospital in Minneapolis.

Health care art has very specific limitations, especially in a children's hospital, according to Russ Williams, the former vice president of facilities and operations at Amplatz. Now vice president of operations at Fairview Southdale Hospital in Edina, Williams worked closely with McGrill on the project.

“Anything abstract, anything that could be remotely scary, we wanted to stay away from,” Williams said. “We wanted something the kids could connect to, that they could recognize. It needed to be relatively age-neutral.”

The hospital chose a different color scheme for each floor and a different animal mascot for each clinical unit.

“When the elevator opens, you’re washed with the color. You’re never going to get off the elevator on the wrong floor,” Williams said. “It was also a wonderful way-find for people who don’t read or don’t read English.”

About 90 percent of the art selected by the hospital was photography, including photos taken by staff members. The rest were custom pieces that McGrill coordinated with artists. The total art budget for the seven-story building was \$300,000.

“Any piece of art that is there from a local artist or a staff member, we actually put a little, teeny plaque underneath,” Williams said. “It was not only a wonderful way to connect the employees to the facilities. It sent a wonderful message to the patients and families to say, ‘Look how connected they are’ ” to the hospital.

Art consultants can also help companies that have acquired other businesses, including their art collections. Maintaining those collections often falls to facilities managers who have no idea what the art is worth or whether it’s worth keeping, restoring or discarding, Palmer-Ross said. Corporate Art Force has helped clients sell their unwanted art through major auction houses or directly to employees, and to recycle less valuable pieces responsibly.

“We do those sorts of things to help them really manage their collection,” Palmer-Ross said. “When you look at the items that somebody has in their office space, a lot of what they buy doesn’t have a very lasting value.”

Last year, the company started offering an art-leasing program that allows clients to rotate their art collections annually or less frequently.

“We think that it is going to make an art program a lot more feasible for people,” Palmer-Ross said.



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