

Selling by Design

nParallel's retail and trade-show displays influence buyers when they're ready to choose.



Company President Megan Diamond and her business partners use cutting-edge design to express clients' brands.

▲ Plymouth-based nParallel calls itself a brand communication, merchandising strategy, and display agency whose specialty is "selling environments." One way to translate that: nParallel creates store interiors and trade-show displays designed to get people to buy.

Founded in 2003 by a group of six veterans in the trade-show and retail industries, nParallel had \$6.4 million in sales last year and it projects \$9.4 million for 2006. It's done work for locally based companies Cambria, Hearth & Home Technologies, Regis, Gander Mountain, and Graco, as well as a few outstate ones, notably Warner Brothers.

nParallel is taking advantage of the fact that retail designs need to be more "grabby" than ever. High-style industrial design—think of handheld consumer electronics like iPods and cell phones—is strongly influencing all design now that manufacturing practices can be applied in larger formats, and

old-school materials like drywall and paint are increasingly giving way to plastics, glass, and metals like embossed aluminum that can be reformed to create softer, more appealing designs. What's more, digital technology allows printing on nearly all of these materials.

"We stay on the cutting edge on materials and design trends by traveling a lot," says company cofounder and president Megan Diamond. "And we get to the right end product by understanding what clients want from the start."

In addition to providing custom displays, the agency manages the entire process from prototyping to outsourcing to final delivery. For trade-show displays, most construction is done in house. For rollouts of retail displays and fixtures that can involve hundreds of stores, nParallel oversees all procurement down to each bolt, as well as assembly and distribution, eliminating the mark-ups that come with multiple vendors.

It's not just convenience and lower costs for the retailer that drive nParallel's success—customer knowledge also

plays a key role. "The single most important factor in customer service is waiting time," Diamond observes. "We understand that, and the other nuances to a shopper's decision-making process."

nParallel recently put this shopper knowledge to work for outdoor retailer Gander Mountain by setting up a new layout and printed material for its stores' footwear area. The material guides shoppers to make the right shoe or boot choice based on price, intended use, and brand—without having to wait for a salesperson.

Besides design capability and shopper knowledge, nParallel is thriving because its founders saw market opportunities to exploit. On the store side, they believed that retailers were looking for a turnkey operation that would oversee the entire display-design process. On the trade-show side, they thought that clients needed a new design source that could provide quality products and service at lower prices. Says Diamond, "There hadn't been a new kid on the block for a long time."

TCB

—Jim Bohlen



nParallel's open, streamlined display for Smiths Medical, a St. Paul-based maker of insulin pumps, features stylish shapes and bright colors.