

What Goes On The Cover?

Walking The Fine Line Between Too Much Clutter and Not Enough Information

by HENRY RUDDLE, *Ruddle Creative*

When a prospective reader, subscriber, ticket buyer, visitor or donor receives any marketing piece from you, he or she will ask two questions:

- 1) What is this about?
- 2) Why should I care?

If you don't answer those questions quickly, don't be surprised

when your newsletter, brochure, direct mail offer, website or other

marketing device fails to generate your dreamed of results.

Modestly Varied Audience

For example, the Spring 1998 edition of the **San Jose Museum of Art's** newsletter, *Frameworks*, has articles about two new exhibits, six ongoing exhibits, a report on the previous year, six ongoing activities, two fundraising events and a sale at the museum store.

Clearly, given that list, the two new exhibits should be featured most prominently on the cover. The ongoing exhibits and activities have had their chance, and non-event related articles such as the annual report should never be featured on the cover (to know why, see "Arts Newsletters" in the May 1998 issue).

Nicely, the dominant cover graphic is a painting from one of the two new exhibits, but the accompanying text makes no distinction between the highlighted events and the rest. It's a judgment call as to whether the museum's readers will take the time to sort it all out. Ultimately, the museum has done a good job of reinforcing the rather obvious answer to the reader's first question (What's it about? "Art!"),

but hasn't given enough thought to answer the more important second question (Why should I care? "I like swimming pools!")

If it's that hard for a relatively easy-to-peg institution such as a museum of art to answer those two questions, how can a performing arts center hope to succeed?

More Varied Audience

The marketing pieces from the three centers below show the range of solutions used by organizations with very diverse audiences. While they all have strengths and

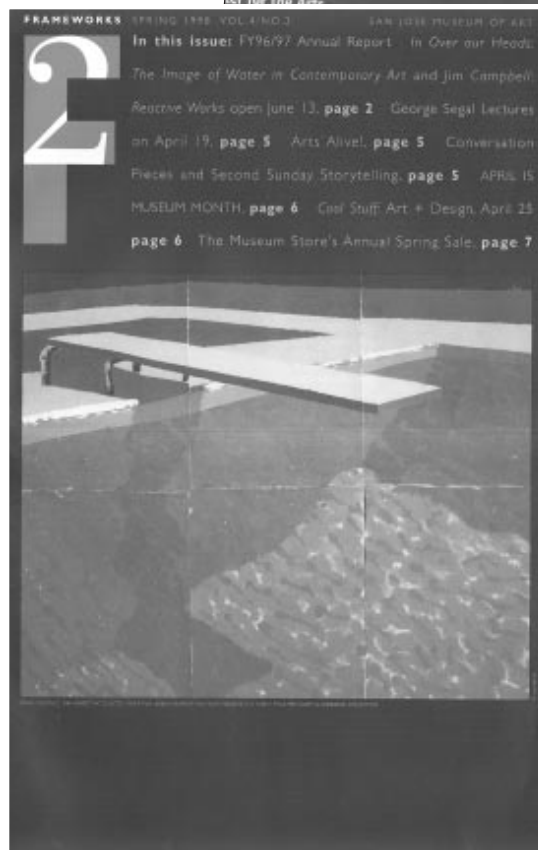
weaknesses, I think the format used by the **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** does the best job of answering the two questions.

Even unfamiliar readers can't help but see the answer to the first question on first glance – it features large photos showing a painting (art), an alien (film), dancers (dance), and a man with a headache (education), showing the center's artistic scope.

DIRECT MAIL SUCCESS TIPS



Yerba Buena Center for the Arts



San Jose Museum of Art

The cover has two major weak spots: no name for the document (unless you count "member newsletter" in 8 point type) and not clear enough information about the exact content of the photos (although since the center hosts dozens of events each quarter, that lack of highlight information could be deliberate).

The season brochure for the **Bailey Concert Hall** does reasonably well, too. I don't think photographs or drawings of the center belong on the front cover, but since most of the hall's patrons do not attend the college where it is located, perhaps the brochure planners can be forgiven for trying to be helpful.

They nearly redeem themselves with the line-up of photos along the bottom, except that the particular

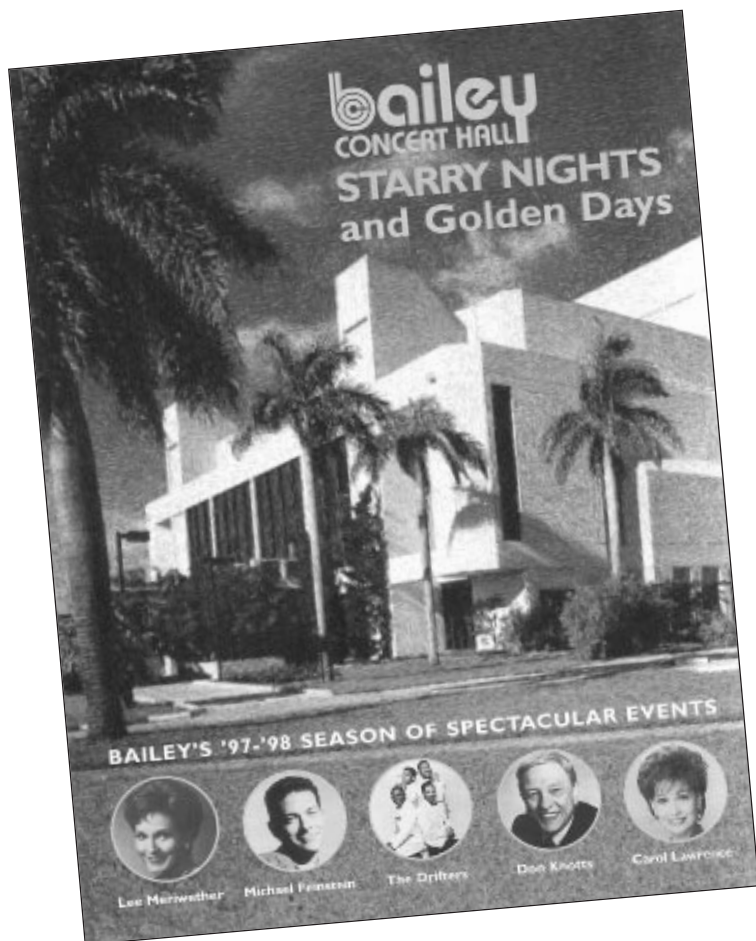
photos they selected are not very representative. In addition to the vague references on the cover to three concerts of mellow musical standards (Michael Feinstein, The Drifters and Carol Lawrence) and two theatrical comedies (Lee Meriwether and Don Knotts, no I won't tell you what plays they starred in either!), the center also hosted a circus, musicals, operas, symphonies, storytelling, kids shows, ballets, and even a ballet on ice that would have interested other audience constituencies.

For a complete change of pace, the **Virginia Museum of Fine Arts** (which includes a performance center), decided to bundle its hopes for the success of its quarterly calendar in one image of a current art exhibition. This technique can actually work out

fine, but it puts a lot of pressure on pages two and three.

The uncluttered, eye-catching image can attract attention, but it does nothing to answer the reader's two questions. It buys the editor of the calendar an opportunity to answer them once the reader turns the page, but if those pages don't tell what the publication (not to mention the museum!) has to offer, not many readers will venture further. ■■

Henry Ruddle owns Ruddle Creative, a marketing communications firm in San José, California currently celebrating its ten year anniversary. For more information, contact him at 1-800-7RUDDLE or visit Ruddle Creative's website at www.ruddle.com.



Bailey Concert Hall

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

