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C3 Brand Marketing finds niche in restaurant offerings for kids

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For 35 years, C3 Brand Marketing has found ways to adapt, thrive and stay ahead of the curve.

The Overland Park-based marketing and design agency specializes in the families with children category for the restaurant and hospitality industries. It works with brands such as Marriott, Main Event, Sonic Drive-In and Texas Roadhouse and designs programs and products such as kids' menus, activity books, toys and cups.



BRYAN SEDEY | C3 BRAND MARKETING

C3 Brand Marketing is located at 4518 W. 107th St. in Overland Park.

Years ago, those types of products were a nice-to-have at restaurants. Now parents expect them, C3 President Jennifer Loper said.

"What we've discovered from our research is that you're not even on a parent's consideration list if you don't have what we call the cost of entry of entertainment for families, like activity books, crayons and toys," she said. "It's a time for families to be together and bond. ... They just want to have a moment of fun and joy with their family. Materials that entertain them and their children allow them to have that simple moment."

Taking a custom approach

To stay on top of industry trends, C3 regularly attends conferences, including Toy Fair, Restaurant Leadership Conference and ones centered on children's education. C3 also attends its clients' conferences to better understand their business and goals.

"We stay relevant by knowing the industry, knowing the clients, knowing our client's business and knowing their consumers," Loper said. "Everything we do is custom. We don't have a warehouse filled with dinosaurs that we slap a logo on."

That custom approach has evolved. Years ago, brands typically worked with one marketing agency – the agency of record. Brands now rely on a variety of specialty agencies beyond their AOR, from digital agencies to media to those specializing in Hispanic or Black consumers. C3 is considered the "kid and family" agency, and it has been adamant about collaborating with a client's other agency partners.

"When we have a seat at that table, we understand the marketing goals for the overall brand and how each of those partners has a role to play," she said.

C3 wants to understand the strategies of each agency and how those strategies fit into the big picture, so it can create the right products.

"It's a way for us to understand the brand in depth and deliver an experience that, quite frankly, we just couldn't do without that much information and knowledge," Loper said.

Going digital

Despite the influx of apps and other digital experiences for children, there's still high demand for tactile products like activity books and toys, she said. For clients with mobile apps, C3 ensures the physical item complements the digital experience. The activity theme on a kid's meal bag, for example, will feature the same characters found on the app.

"Parents don't want just that digital experience, and honestly, kids don't either," Loper said. "There is a developmental need to pick things up with your hands and draw and have the ability to create and manipulate things. ... There's also desire for this imagination play that you can't get through a digital game right now."

Being selfless

A key to staying relevant has been C3's selfless approach, she said.

"We've never as a company thought, 'What's in it for us?'" Loper said. "When you're selfless and others focused, you're able to understand what's important to your clients and their consumers. That then gives you a window into what you need to be focused on, and that's really what we've done. That touches all aspects of our business."

It extends to its 34 employees. Before flex scheduling was mainstream, C3 adopted half-day Fridays and allowed employees to work flexible hours and part-time.

Having half-day Fridays was a "game-changer" for Loper, who had young kids at the time. It gave her time to run errands without children.

"Some of our top people are the ones who work these part-time flex and unusual schedules," she said. "They bring so much value to our organization, that not leaning into that would have been a huge mistake for us related to the success of our clients and the success of our organization."

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