

Above: The Media Artists staff in their office in Albino, Italy.

From left to right: Fabia Pasinelli, architect; Joe Connell, captain of creative team; Tomas Carrara, account manager; Eli Jones, copywriter; Michael Connell, creative director/president; Andrea Santwier, special projects; Eva Martinelli, executive assistant; and Barbara Lussana, office manager. Right: Promotional poster for client Vuarnet.

with that, he moved into the production and business end of the projects, becoming part of what he calls a "commercial communication arts business."

Media Artists soon grew into a full-service design studio with 10 people-a creatively aggressive group of both Italians and Americans. They design for 14 Italian and European clients ranging from fashion to snowboarding. Media Artists produces product catalogs and developed a marketing strategy for the local licensee of Vuarnet. The firm's other clients include Mammut, a Swiss mountaineering clothing and equipment company; K2; Pertex Textiles; and Agip Petroleum products. Regarding future accounts, Connell says, "Stay tuned for more."

Staying Professional in Rural Italy

The studio is situated about an hour from Milan in Albino, a small town where the locals affectionately call the

Media Artists staff "Ragazzi Americani," which means "The Americans." Finding a location was really a question of finding adequate space. "We had to find real offices," Connell says. "Finding any sort of space isn't easy in Italy. When our current offices became available, they also happened to be furnished. Another important factor is that we work very closely with a

fashion-design studio owned by one of my partners, Vittorio Giacomelli, situated near Albino. [Connell owns the majority of Media Artists, but Giacomelli and Tomas Carrara, Media Artists' account manager, also own part of the firm.]

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"Living and working in Albino allows for a very nice atmosphereminus the hectic pace of a major metropolitan city—but physically close enough that when we need specialize help, it's no problem. And clients like it, too," he says. Connell points out that major European cities are easily



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Media Artists designed this 1995 advertising campaign promoting Mammut's climbing products.

accessible, and technology allows

them to serve clients quickly through faxes and overnight deliveries.

Media Artists' 2,800 sq. ft. studio space is tight but charmingly adequate, situated in two suites above Albino's Compra Bene grocery store. The studio houses creative functions in one suite with administrative functions in the other. A "creative playroom" conference and brainstorming room is set aside in the design area. Because of a growing client list and workload, the firm is considering purchasing an old monastery, church or farm house to expand its office space in the near future.

Media Artists stays on the cutting edge of computer technology with Power Macs, PowerBooks, Quadras, Performas, scanners, network servers, and color and laser printers. The studio's software list includes QuarkXPress, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Acrobat, Streamline, Fractal Painter and Macromedia FreeHand-everything they need to provide state-of-the-art service to their local and international clients.

Marketing Their Designs

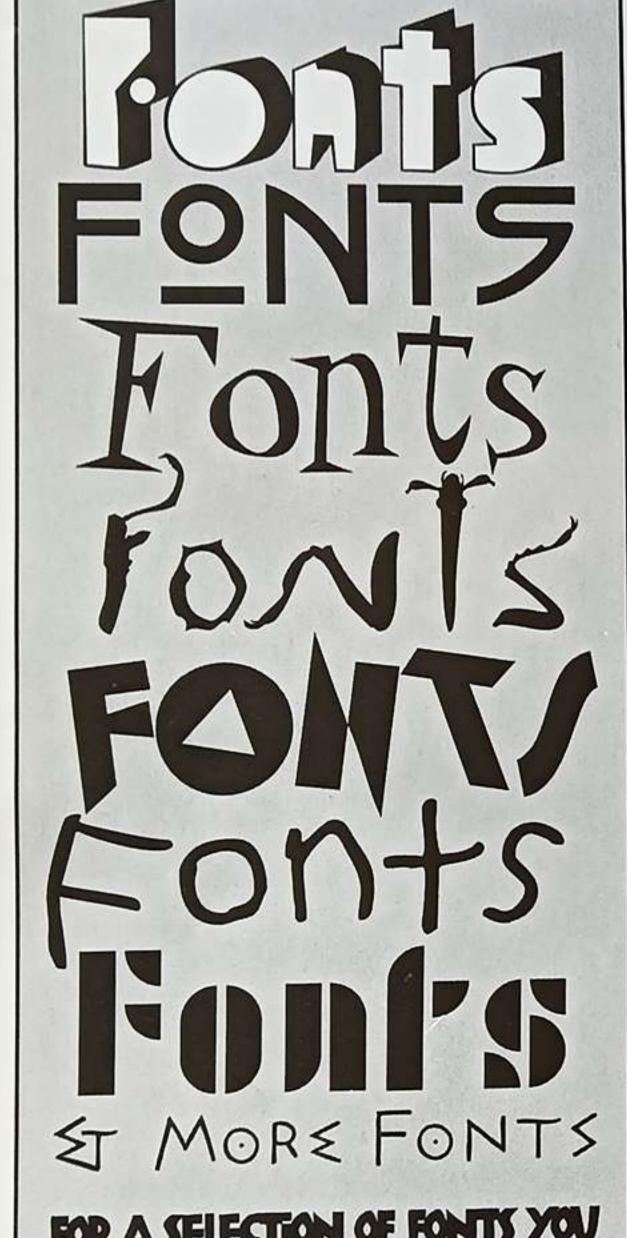
Word-of-mouth has been the studio's best sales tool, helping to bolster the firm's reputation. "We offer something different from comparable businesses here," Connell says. "[Clients] are very drawn to our complete service as well as our mix of American and European ideas. Eighty percent of our clients are from outside of Italy." Competition in this market is

heavily price-based, not necessarily tal. ent-based, he feels. But, he adds, "While we've been able to source well and get excellent prices for our clients, we also aren't willing to jeopardize our creative integrity just to be the cheapest."

Media Artists' business strategy emphasizes networking with some cold calling thrown into the mix. "We're in the process of rewriting our strategy so we become more proactive in terms of sales," Connell says. "In the future, we'll be doing more prospect contacting, and we plan to start a direct-mail project."

The Media Artists staff has already produced a self-promotion package featuring the work they've done, distributing the material selectively or as a leave-behind piece. Future plans are very ambitious, matching founder Connell's optimistic and aggressive personality. Plans include expanding into the U.S., probably somewhere on the West Coast. Connell says his studio is "looking forward to gaining more international exposure. From there, we're thinking globally. Our strategy to open satellite offices in three other world locations."

Regarding the Italian design market and the local attitude toward design and creativity, Connell says, "It isn't great. The biggest problem is that there's a lack of [client] education on the value of good design and communications. Many Italians are focused on the 15th century when it comes to design, architecture and art causing a classical art and historical



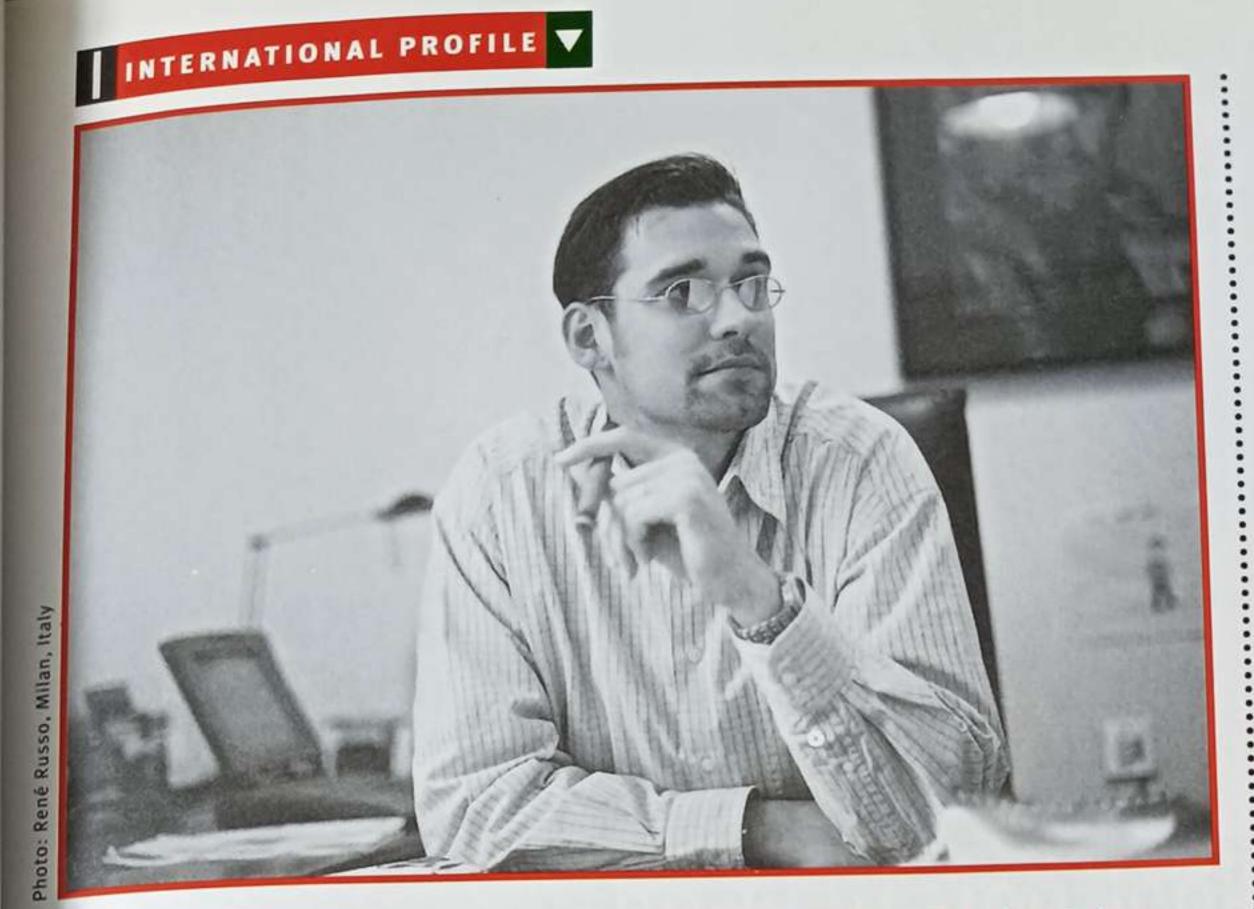
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"I began to enjoy the people, the country, my surroundings, everything about Italy—especially the food and wine," says Michael Connell, creative director/president of Media Artists. So five years ago, Connell transformed a fashion-modeling gig in Italy into a graphic design career, opening his own studio.

focus. Often, there's a lack of focus on the development of modern arts like phic design. We push to educate clients and staff-teach them 's new, how graphic design can a difference to their product their corporate] image." Media Artists has a unique philos-Connell calls "creativita precisa" recise creativity. He defines this as tivity backed by precision in manment. The firm's project proposals lude all aspects of the job, from ncept through production, printing d distribution. This way, Connell s tys, the client receives just one cost-effective invoice, eliminating a great deal of bureaucracy and paperwork-"the dreaded deadline killers."

Connell defines his management philosophy this way: "Deadlines are deadlines and some semblance of structure and order must be maintained. At Media Artists, we meet deadlines though the use of an opendoor management policy [where staff] can tug at the roots of their boss' hair and let some of their own grow back."

New World Order

"Ragazzi Americani" in tiny Albino are apparently making their presence

known throughout their host country and Europe. In his ambitious global plans, "precise creativity" may well make it to Michael Connell's native country and beyond. And Media Artists' experience may also be a lesson to ambitious designers worldwide. With a great deal of hard work, some sacrifice, a strong point of view, a lot of self-confidence, a little luck and a sharp eye for opportunity coupled with an unshakable desire to succeed, it's possible to excel, even if the road taken isn't exactly straight.

Karl H. Steinbrenner of Steinbrenner & Co. Communications in New York City has a career covering more than 30 years of art direction, creative direction and graphic design copywriting in the U.S. and 14 other countries. (212)808-9141.

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