

A Cast of Characters

My studio was only a half mile from home. If I had blinked, I would have missed the majesty of the morning. It was so clear that day, it seemed as if I could have reached out and touched the snow-capped mountains. Now, three hours later, I had other things on my mind.

“Power Graphics,” my assistant Gloria said cheerfully as she answered the fourth call of the morning. I looked up from the computer where I was working on a syrup label. She had a funny look on her face. “Hi. How are you? Sure, he’s here. Hang on.” She covered the mouthpiece. “It’s Craig Winn!”

Gloria seemed surprised to hear from Craig. I know I was. After the Lights of America project, he had disappeared off our radar screen. But there he was on the phone.

“Hi, Craig,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I’m starting a new business called Value America. I’d like you to design the logo and some sales materials. Are you interested?”

“Of course. When do we start?”

I thought I heard Gloria groan.

Craig descended on Power Graphics like a cloud of locusts, poised to devour every available minute. He brought the large, black open-topped briefcase we had come to refer to as “the black hole,” because anything in the vicinity—sketches, printouts, documentation—was likely to get sucked into it. The first thing Craig pulled out was a humongous business plan. He asked me to take it home and read it.

Then he pulled out a manila folder filled with clippings. “The first thing we need to work on,” he said, “is the logo. The logo sets the tone for the entire company. It establishes the identity, style, and character. It tells the world what the firm is all about....”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I’m the designer. I’m supposed to be telling you these things.” It was strange working with someone who took such a personal, hands-on interest in my business.

He opened the folder and laid the clippings on the table. “Here are some things I like. Just for inspiration.” The images were all contemporary and all looked good against a white background. “This isn’t a store you can drive to. It’s just electrons on a screen,” he said. “So first and foremost, we need to look credible, reliable...real!”

“But it’s also the Web,” I countered. “Fluid, dynamic—new.”

“That’s right. Part of the logo needs to reflect the dynamic, ever-changing nature of the Web. So write ‘Value’ in a free-flowing script. It needs to look shiny and fresh, so new the ink has yet to dry. And ‘America’—make America solid and dependable.”

I grabbed a sketchpad and started fooling around.

Sitting down at my Macintosh, I typed “AMERICA” in large, red, Palatino caps. Then, with tracing paper, I wrote “Value.” I superimposed the two words on a light table, moving the sketch around until I liked the relative position. Then I traced “Value” again electronically using my computerized drawing tablet, so the image appeared on my screen. With America in red, Value just had to be blue.

“Great, so far,” Craig said, looking over my shoulder. “But it still needs a graphic element to help symbolize our business—bringing people and products together. How about earth?”

“Perfect.” I showed him a shot from one of my stock photo books. “What you’re doing is environmentally sound. It will make the world seem a little smaller by bringing us all together. This NASA image from outer space can also symbolize cyber-space.” I did a quick scan. The whole thing had taken no more than fifteen minutes. I was starting to appreciate the speed of Internet development. Too bad I was billing by the hour.

We looked at the “finished” sketch. “That’s it!” Craig said, wearing the proud smile of a new parent. He studied his logo on my screen. “We could work for weeks and not come up with anything better.”

I had to agree. So much for the sketch stage. Of course, it took hours of computer illustration, and days of tinkering, adjusting, and tweaking, before we were satisfied. We added a tag line, “The Living Store” beneath the logo in gold. That’s how we were coming to think of Value America—as a store where products were taken out of their boxes; they came alive.

That night I read the business plan. The first thing that went through my mind was, “This can’t miss. He’s thought of everything.” The plan eliminated all of the things consumers hate about shopping and at the same time had given manufacturers the things they wanted.

The second thing that occurred to me was, “This could put me out of business.” I was a packaging designer. My work was designed to be seen at the point of purchase, attracting, educating, and motivating people to exchange their money for my clients’ products. With Value America, the point of purchase would no longer be where the package was. It would be where the computer was—in people’s homes and offices.

Value America’s presentations would be able to explain a product’s merits in far greater detail than any package I could design. And they could be instrumental in differentiating between products—helping consumers make better choices, something a package could never do.

Taken to its logical conclusion, there would be no need for packaging graphics at all. A shipping carton would be all you’d need. As I finished the business plan, the seeds of an “If-you-can’t-beat-’em-join-’em” mentality began to grow in my mind.

CRAIG WAS TIRED of the little steak place, but Quiel apparently still loved it. For what had seemed like a hundred lunches, they had always sat in the same booth. They had always had the same thing to eat, although they didn’t actually order any more—the steak sandwiches just appeared.

Today Craig had a very specific agenda. Between bites, he laid out his concept for Value America. Then he explained how Lights of America fit into the picture. “We need a way to show brands the awesome potential of our Product Presentations,” he said. “And what better products than yours? Your Electronic Lights are incredible, but they’re also incredibly difficult to sell.”

“You’re right. Once you know how good they are, you can’t live without them,” Quiel offered. “But getting the idea across...”

“Exactly. So we’d like to use Lights of America for our first series of Product Presentations. You’re perfect—high-quality products with a story that needs to be told.”

“So what do you want from me, my friend?” Quiel asked.

You now own an awesome collection of design resources—photos, charts, computer illustrations, research, and the like—and they’re all at Power Graphics.”

“So you want to use our products and our materials to demonstrate how your store will work,” Quiel asked rhetorically.

“Yes. I want you to be our first brand. I’m willing to give you an exclusive in energy-efficient lighting in exchange for letting us use you as the poster child for our new concept.”

Craig searched Quiel’s poker face for a reaction. “We’ll be offering our multimedia presentations for five thousand dollars per product category, and we’ll add a video demonstration for another five thousand. I’d like to create five comprehensive presentations for you, including multimedia and video, at just ten thousand dollars apiece.

“You know from experience, Quiel, that it costs many times that just to get a professional video done. The ad agency I’m working out of is charging their clients over a hundred grand for websites that do a lot less than ours will,” Craig pressed. “Best of all, Value America will become one of your customers.”

“I’ve got to tell you,” Quiel said, “I really like the idea, especially the video demonstrations. But it sounds too cheap. Can you really do all of this for so little? What’s it going to cost you?”

Craig reassured Quiel he had done a thorough analysis. “Five presentations at ten thousand each,” he said. Half down, twenty five thousand, will get us started. The other half is due when they’re Web-enabled.”

Quiel was astounded. Craig’s proposal looked like a giveaway.

“My friend, you have a deal. I’ll have a check cut immediately.” The money wasn’t a big deal for a company grossing \$100 million a year, but it was huge for the infant Web retailer, a godsend.

Grateful, Winn sweetened the deal, “The Internet isn’t ready yet for the caliber of presentations I’ve envisioned, so we’ll be cutting a CD-ROM version of our store. It will feature your product presentations. As a way of saying thanks, I’ll give you a hundred copies.”

I was the first person Craig sought out when he got back from lunch with Quiel. He was positively euphoric. Try as I might, I couldn’t muster as much enthusiasm as he obviously had. My reaction was rather one of profound relief that the work I’d done so far wasn’t going to end up on the cutting-room floor.

I needn’t have worried. As it turned out, the week I had put onto the product presentation project was merely the smallest tip of the iceberg. Value America was destined to become Power Graphics’ ball and chain for the next five months.

For the founders, it had been their second twenty-foot sudden-death putt. Had he not convinced Lights of America to partner with their new enterprise, there might not have been a Value America. I now recognize what Craig knew then—without the immense collection of spectacular graphics, beautiful photography, and intellectually compelling products that we had at our fingertips, there would have been no earthly way to compose the caliber of product presentations needed to persuade the world’s leading brands to pay to partner with a store that didn’t exist.

“The first one is the hardest,” Craig observed as he placed his hand on my shoulder. That made sense. If you could point to one big, successful company that had invested in your idea, and could show others what wonderful things you had done for them, it stood to reason other brands would be less skeptical and more receptive.

Now that we had our first brand and products to sell, all we needed was a store. And all that stood between us and a store was the way it looked and the way it worked. I was prepared to tackle the design, but we were a little short on technologists.

Hiring Joe was the answer. We could look at the \$15,000 advance the partners had wasted on Internet Connect as a finder’s fee. We had been impressed with Joe’s programming skill and business acumen, but there was more to him than that. There was evidence that Joe Page was a man of character. Loyalty, even to a deadbeat, was more important to Joe than money. Had not the business plan plainly stated that virtue was to be desired over all else?

Day after day, Craig pleaded with Joe for hours on end. Desperation helps you focus. Finally Joe cracked. He became the first employee of Value America. It was April Fools’ Day, 1996.

“This is going to be your desk,” Craig said to Joe. “I know it’s tight, but it’s only temporary.” Considering what day it was, Joe could be forgiven for thinking it was all a joke. But it wasn’t.

“Tight” was putting it mildly. The company had now moved into the palatial 600-square-foot office of Power Graphics. Except for the lack of room, it made perfect sense. Craig was spending all his time here anyway, working on the marketing and sales tools for his new enterprise. So we had taken the logical, if somewhat painful, next step. We had another couple phone lines put in, cleared off some space next to the coffee pot for Craig’s stuff, and had Value America business cards printed up with our Beach Boulevard address. The company picked up half our modest rent and part of Gloria’s salary as well.

Just because Joe was now receiving a paycheck instead of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, his opinions hadn’t changed. He had serious concerns about making the programming magic happen. Despite his reservations, we plowed ahead, using a print-graphics software program just to get our ideas into viewable form. We knew that for Joe to “see” the store Craig envisioned we’d first have to picture it on paper.

Joe Page, the Web geek, set about teaching Ken Power, the print guru, just what it was that made Craig’s front-end ideas so improbable. Craig and I were used to a world where people saw pretty much what you wanted them to see. If you placed a headline at such and such a size in such and such a place, it stayed there, right next to the photograph that had also been carefully sized and positioned for the proper graphic effect. Print was predictable. There was even a computer graphics term, an acronym, for seeing your exact page layout on the computer screen. WYSIWYG (pronounced wizzy-wig), meant What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get, a capability that had revolutionized my industry.

With Web pages, things were not so simple, especially back then. The page layout was controlled by the viewer’s browser. This caused several problems. First, the user could set some graphic parameters like the size of the text. Second, there was more than

one browser. Some people still used the feature-poor Mosaic, though most were using Netscape, and there was a new one from Microsoft. Because it was from Microsoft, Internet Explorer might eventually dominate the market, so we had to pay attention to its quirks and idiosyncrasies. Third, each viewer's monitor size and the resolution they chose played a part in altering the final image. Someone with a 24-bit, 20-inch Sony Multiscan monitor running at a 1,024x768 pixel resolution could see something quite different than someone using an 8-bit, 14-inch NEC with 640x480 resolution.

There were many parts to the Value America graphics project. First was the store itself, its story, how it worked, why it was better, what it would do for you as a shopper. At its heart was the design of the product presentations and purchasing panels. Both were eloquently described in the business plan, but Craig knew that most people were incapable of really "seeing" what he'd envisioned. They needed more than words and more than a plan—they needed visual imagery. That's where I came in. Craig and I took every part of the store and brought it to life.

Our second big project was the printed materials. We set about designing two brochures. The Retail Revolution explained the problem, the existing retail environment, which relied on expensive advertising, poorly informed sales people, and inadequate point-of-sale materials to educate consumers. Value America's Living Store with its interactive presentations was the solution. The Retail Revolution was designed to encourage brands to partner with us.

It's About Time presented our corporate mission. It revealed how we were going to enable consumers to become better buyers. Suppliers, or brands, as we called them, would triumph by realizing their dreams of increasing sales through closer customer intimacy. And the company's factory-direct efficiency was sure to save everyone money. The brochure described tomorrow's communication network, where consumers, manufacturers, and freight companies all came together through electronic financial transactions and data management.

Of course, none of what it presented actually existed. Not in our store, not in any store. Nobody was doing any business to speak of on the Web. Even Amazon, the innovative online bookseller, was but a fledgling reality. Our new sales tools, both electronic and print, presented things as we were sure they would soon be. It was our job to present, build, and sell the future.

The best example of this became project number three. We created a fully functioning version of our store on a CD-ROM. It was the only way to demonstrate how our store was going to work and how our customers would interact with it. Craig could paint an exciting word picture, but comprehending this concept without an audio-visual aid was beyond impossible.

People could view the CD-ROM on their PCs, and it would work just like the real—i.e., virtual—store we intended to build. It proved to be an extremely valuable tool for the next year, until there was an actual store, doing actual business, with actual customers. Unfortunately, it was expensive, a real budget buster. If Quiel had not been willing to sponsor its production, I wouldn't be telling this story today.

Technical experts scoffed at the interactive multimedia store we created on the CD-ROM. They said it was impossible to execute online. So we must have done the impossible: Value America's first actual online store looked and worked exactly like

what we'd said it would. It was but one of a thousand bold predictions we willed into reality.

Sometimes we felt like we were working within an Escher print. Everything was upside down, mirror imaged, and backwards. The current technology would not allow us to operate in the present, and the tools of the future didn't exist yet. So we had to rely on our past to present our future. Solomon was right: there's nothing new under the sun.

Working with concepts in lieu of reality, it was only natural that symbols and metaphors would become our lingua franca. Very early in the game, one image emerged as our symbol for the whole idea: a butterfly. It probably wasn't the first time a butterfly had been used to exemplify a new commercial venture, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. Even mighty Microsoft has come to use these small, colorful creatures.

The idea was metamorphosis. Value America had emerged from the cocoon of a greedy and voracious caterpillar, the existing retail world. Our caterpillar, named MalMart, was a member of the species *buggus retailus*. It represented everything we thought was wrong with retail. High prices, grumpy and uninformed salespeople, long register lines, and sticky price tags were attributed to this ugly little critter.

MalMart had had his day. Now *buggus* was being transformed into the beautiful Value America butterfly, of the species *wholesaleus educatus*. More than merely beautiful, our butterfly was a symbol for freedom, moving effortlessly and gracefully throughout our store, visiting and investigating whatever struck its fancy. Okay, maybe we were taking our metaphors a little too seriously. But we were having fun.

The butterfly played a starring role in an animation we called "The Good Buy Machine," a fanciful illustration of how factory-direct shopping worked. The Good Buy Machine started with a shopper sitting at his PC, clicking his mouse to buy a product. Our butterfly fluttered from his computer to a teeter-totter springboard, which launched a young lady in a graceful dive into a pool of water, which splashed, startling a sleeping cat, who jumped into the air with a terrific yowl. This got the attention of a dog sitting on a conveyor belt. As the dog ran toward the cat, the conveyor belt started to turn, tripping a lever attached to the dog's leash that caused a pair of mechanical hands to place the shopper's order on a ramp. It sent an electronic message to an airplane, which came swooping out of the sky, grabbed the box with a dangling hook, and flew it to the shopper, where it was dropped gently into his waiting arms with a fluffy parachute. It was all set to music with sound effects punctuating the action.

I was skeptical, but Craig assured me that this was how it was done.

We had a "Catch 22." A store is not a store without brands and the products they make. Yet there are no brands or products to sell until there is a store. So to produce our first product video demonstrations, Craig found a small production company willing to do the job on a shoestring. They assembled a team of actors and technicians—makeup artists, Teleprompter operators, and sound techs—and we proceeded to make a liar out of Craig to the one person who really counted—his wife.

We had no choice, really. There was simply no other way to do it. Craig had made a solemn promise to Katharine when he had used their home as a glorified photo studio during the Lights of America packaging project that he would never ask her to go through

that again. But here he was, doing exactly that. Well, not exactly. This time it was broadcast-quality video production. There were five times as many people and ten times as much equipment as before. She was not amused. The whole idea had been to get her husband out of her kitchen.

The battle plan, though, was brilliant. As we shot the video clips, we used a still photographer to shoot the people who were shooting the video. After all, we need to show future brand partners what they would be getting.

The place was a zoo. For three incredible days, we had movie sets in every corner of the house, even spilling out to the poolside patio and the rose garden overlooking the ocean. Actors were holding forth in the living room, the dining room, the office, and out by the cabaña. Lights of America fixtures were installed and photographed in bedroom ceilings and in front-yard security applications.

Craig and I were all over it like a swarm of mosquitoes, suggesting scene locations, helping the crew get set up, making minor changes in the scripts as they were loaded into the Teleprompters, and telling the photographer what we wanted him to shoot. There were cables running across the floors in profusion, light stands everywhere, make-up cases, wardrobe racks, 'prompter computers, sound booms, power packs, and portable editing equipment.

Frugality being the watchword, we used whatever and whomever was at hand. Rex Scatena modeled for us, as did Craig's kids, Ryan and Blake. Jane Scatena, Rex's stunning wife and professional thespian, played roles in several of the videos. Even Craig's photogenic and cooperative yellow Labrador, Crystal, got into the act. A shameless scene stealer.

The final result was a graphic presence that made Value America look as if we had been in business for years. The materials gave us the appearance of professionals who knew what we were doing. The catalogs and the multimedia CD-ROM store clearly showed that we had the skills to perform for our brand partners. Our virtual version of the virtual store looked great. We were virtually ready.

"WELCOME TO BRAVO Burger. May I take your order?" Oh, yeah. Craig and I knew fine dining. Whenever we felt like we needed a break from the grind, we'd get out of my claustrophobic studio, grab a bite at one of the local drive-thrus, and head for the park. Perry Park was just around the corner. It was two acres of grass, trees, benches, and playground equipment snuggled amongst the nice but aging tract houses in my Huntington Beach neighborhood. There was a grammar school adjacent to the park, and we both enjoyed listening to the kids' chatter as they played outdoors.

"When we're all through with this," Craig announced one fine day in March, "I'm going to move to Charlottesville, Virginia, to build the company." He took a sip of his iced tea. "It's the perfect place. Lots of history and charm. It's home to the University of Virginia and Monticello."

"Like on the nickel, right?"

"Right. You don't have to be in a big city to run an Internet store. You could do it from a cornfield in Iowa, or in Sam Walton's back yard next to a chicken coop in Arkansas. You just have to have the basic services. Charlottesville is beautiful, full of

writers. And it's close to the Internet hub in Pentagon City. Did you know that Charlottesville has more published authors per capita than any other town in America?" Craig asked, munching an onion ring. "It should be easy to attract and hire good people. It's such a wholesome place."

"They got trees?" My wife and I had always dreamed of moving out of Southern California to settle in some place that was greener.

"Oh, yeah. Lots of trees. Charlottesville is in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. There are oaks, poplars, maples, black walnuts—dogwoods and redbuds too. And some of the prettiest farmland you've ever seen. Jefferson called it Eden."

"Sounds beautiful," I said. "So how did you find Charlottesville?"

"That's a long story," Craig said.

"I love a good story." I took a bite of my burger.

"Okay. A couple of years ago, when we were doing the Lights project, my oldest son, Ryan, was having trouble in school. Couldn't concentrate."

"Ryan?" I asked rhetorically. That didn't sound like the Ryan I knew. Sharp kid. A lot like his dad. They looked the same too, almost like twins, just thirty years apart.

"Yeah. The school called us in and said they thought he had ADD...."

"Attention Deficit Disorder," I said. As the parent of several "special-needs" kids, I was familiar with it.

"That's right. So we took him to a psychologist, and she put him through a battery of tests. She said that things weren't checking out for ADD, and asked if she could test his IQ."

"So what happened?"

"She called us frantically after the test, all excited, but worried at the same time, very emotional. She had tested thousands of people, adults and children, over the last twenty years. She told me that Ryan's IQ was off the chart. That explained why he was doing poorly in school. He was bored stiff—a nine-year-old boy whose mind was working like he was in college."

I thought of my sweet little Molly, whom Gayle and I had adopted at about one year old. She had made it to three before she died. Molly had a minus IQ—pre-newborn. The most advanced thing she ever learned how to do was smile, during the last few months of her short life. "Well, at least it was good news," I said.

"No, that's not what the psychologist told us," Craig mused. "She said, 'This is the worst news I could give you. Studies on profoundly gifted children aren't real encouraging.' A lot of bad stuff can happen, especially in adolescence. Then she gave me some advice: 'Get your son out of California, out of public schools. Find a more wholesome environment. You may have to educate him yourself,' she said."

"You've got two boys, right?"

"Yeah. Katie suggested testing Blake."

Blake was fifteen months younger than his brother. He favored his mom, right down to the twinkle in his eye.

"She called again, shell-shocked. Apparently Blake had turned the IQ test into a game, like Jeopardy. He'd fire off answers before she could finish the questions, no working it out, just boom, here it is, with a big grin. She told me he may be smarter than his brother."

"Really?" I shook my head. "So how does that lead you to Virginia?"

“I was trying to figure out how I was going to handle the challenge—being both dad and teacher. I boned up on my math, science, and history, and tutored the kids where I could. I’d bring in computer tutors and others to teach them in areas where I couldn’t.”

“So, Professor Winn?” I laughed.

“Yeah. Katie and I took the boys on an educational trip to show them how America was born and how we had to struggle for our freedom. We took them out of school and flew to Boston, and then we worked our way down the East Coast, stopping at every important historical site, Philadelphia, Gettysburg, Washington, Mount Vernon, Williamsburg, Yorktown...and one of our stops was Charlottesville.”

“Home of Thomas Jefferson,” I recited.

“Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Meriwether Lewis, among others. It was early spring, and they were celebrating the ‘Dogwood Festival,’ complete with parade. The whole thing was so charming, we couldn’t believe it. We found ourselves asking around about schools and real estate. Turns out there was a private school equipped to deal with the special needs of my kids. And of course, there’s the university—it dominates the city.”

“Sounds like you found the perfect place,” I said, a little jealous.

“Yep, I think so,” Craig replied happily. “We’ve been looking for a farm close to town. Katie has loved the idea of moving to the south ever since she met the Governor of South Carolina. Some time ago he tried to entice us to build our company in his state. So Katie thinks we should build Tara, you know, as in *Gone with the Wind*.”

I could feel myself turning green, and it wasn’t the greasy burger. But there was no time for envy. We had work to do.

“I’M GOING. I don’t care.”

“Bill, please, listen to me,” Craig pleaded. “As much as I believe in this, Value America is a long shot. I don’t want you to leave Lights to take a chance on something that could easily fail. Besides, you’re needed there. We’ve brought them from a bow-and-arrow marketing to cruise missiles. In the wrong hands, that arsenal is dangerous.”

“They’re driving me crazy, Craig,” Hunt admitted. “These guys won’t rest until they’ve taken your cruise missiles and changed them back into Sopwith Camels. The brothers are great guys, but...”

Craig sighed. “Still, we’ve sold one brand so far. One...somebody who already knew and trusted us. Your employer, I might add. It’s going to take a lot more than that to give us the right to hire people away from good jobs.”

Hunt relented. “Okay, but don’t say ‘no.’ Say ‘maybe later,’ all right?”

“Sure, Bill,” Craig knew how much Bill loved Charlottesville.

“Listen. There’s someone I want you to meet. He was my roommate at Harvard when I did my post-graduate studies. We’re still close friends. Now he’s the president of a hardware conglomerate. I think he may like what you’re doing.”

“I’d love an intro. Who is he?”

“Ray Kennedy. He runs...”

“Masco: Baldwin, Thermador, Hot Springs, Delta, and Peerless? That Ray Kennedy, right?”

“Yeah. Why? What?” Bill could see that Craig was genuinely amused.

Through a big grin, Craig explained the coincidence of the century to his old friend. “You remember Christi Reynolds?...”

A WEEK LATER, Craig, Bill, and Rex walked through the front doors of Masco’s corporate headquarters. They had FedExed their new brochures ahead. The demo CD-ROM was hot off the presses. This was to be its maiden flight.

It was a little intimidating walking into Masco. They were the most successful home-improvement corporation in the world, and the building had been designed to display that success. “Opulent” was hardly a big enough word to describe it. The artwork alone was worth a fortune, but it was the selection of art that told the real story. Classic American paintings lined the walls. A magnificent collection of Remington bronzes graced the public areas. America had been good to Masco, and the company seemed determined to return the favor.

Among such luxurious surroundings, it was easy to imagine that arrogance and greed could have been instrumental in amassing so much wealth. Knowing Ray Kennedy, Bill knew better already. Craig and Rex were about to learn that nice guys often finish first.

Kennedy had moved fast to gather an appropriate audience. The head of each business group was there, as was the VP of Marketing. Good thing. The boys from California had a remarkable tale to tell.

Craig began by telling his audience what he was going to share. He told them why partnering with his new company was in their interest—including just enough detail to legitimize his rationale. He provided insights into their business to show he’d taken the time to appreciate their challenges. Then he concluded by summarizing what he had presented.

The smarter the audience, the more impressive the presentation. Winn studies them as he speaks, analyzing their body language. Are they leaning forward or back, are their arms crossed or open, are they fidgeting or motionless? He dissects their expressions: are they comfortable enough with the presentation to make eye contact, are their brows raised or lowered, are their lips lifted in a smile, lowered in a grimace, or flat-lined with bewilderment? He studies their hands: are they placed over their mouth trying to restrain a question, on their cheeks as they listen intently, or are they engaged in taking notes? Everything is tailored to the audience: pace, length, breadth, humor, detail, and depth of insight.

With some audiences, he will begin by teaching the basics of retail or the Web, making them more receptive to his story. Other times, he moves directly to his innovative solutions, recognizing that those listening share a common understanding of the challenges.

With the most enlightened audiences, he leaves his strongest points unspoken, knowing someone will ask the right question. That’s when he’s in his element. He seems as comfortable on his feet as a politician at a press conference—funny when appropriate, serious when necessary, always articulate, and never without an answer.

There was magic in the air that day. Winn had found a compatriot in Ray Kennedy. The man was brilliant and wise, compassionate and tough, idealistic and realistic. Like Craig, Ray had been in the trenches. He had led by example. He knew his business. When

Craig talked about replacing warehouses with technology and inventory with systems, Kennedy stayed right there with him every step of the way. The presentation became a discussion.

“So you’re going to do one better than WalMart,” Kennedy observed. “They send us small orders each week by store based upon what their customers bought the prior week. You’re just compressing the process—transmitting orders by customer, in real time.”

“Precisely.”

“I assume you intend to use EDI?”

“Indeed.”

“So when you send the order to us electronically,” Ray asked, “you’re planning to attach a file that includes the customer’s name and address so we can automate the label printing process and eliminate the need for a stencil, right?”

“Correct.”

“How large do you think the average order might be?”

“My plan calls for two hundred dollars,” Winn answered, knowing that number was ten times larger than what the experts were predicting for online sales and identical to that of most traditional retail orders. “We’ve made a commitment to sell only the best products from the best brands. By doing that, I believe we’ll earn our customers’ trust. And our product presentations should enable us to sell better goods than our competitors.”

Ray Kennedy’s body language did all the talking. His hand covered his mouth. His brows were raised, his eyes danced, he leaned forward. “Our existing customers already require us to have the kind of infrastructure needed to accommodate your ‘inventory-less model,’” he said.

Craig smiled. “Karl Marx once said, ‘Capitalists will sell us the rope we’ll use to hang them.’”

“Gentlemen,” Ray told his team, “they’re right. What they’re asking us to do is ship their customers directly, bypassing the retail store. We’ve invested millions setting ourselves up to do this very thing. In fact, what they want us to do is even easier than what we’re required to do now. I like getting closer to the real customer, too—the consumer.”

The assembled suits were all nodding. They, like their leader, had earned the right to be there. They knew the score. They knew retail was broken, inefficient, and abusive. As they drilled down layer after layer into the esoteric and arcane world of business structure, the Masco executives became more and more convinced that this was the right idea at the right time, and that these were the guys who could make it happen.

“I love your product presentations,” Kennedy concluded.

Thank God Lights said yes! Craig thought. “Ray, your companies have prospered by making great products. Yet you have no way to tell the customer why Delta’s single-handle faucets and washerless systems are superior. No package, and certainly no retailer, is able to explain the merits of your ‘Brilliance’ lifetime tarnish protection. Imagine empowering the president of each company to make an individual presentation directly to every consumer with a full range of multimedia tools.”

“These guys are prepared to give us what we want. The way they’ve anticipated our needs, the way they’ve designed their solution to mesh with our systems, gives me every confidence they’ll succeed in building this thing,” Kennedy said. “They have unified our

interests with theirs—and with the consumer’s.” With that, he slapped his open hand on the conference table and stood up. “We would be proud to be your partner.”

A list of brands was drawn up, along with a preliminary estimate of the number of presentations each would require. Masco corporate would partially fund the effort, the various divisions making up the balance. The hook was set, but reeling in this huge fish—getting each of the divisions to sign their listing agreements and provide the money to get started—would take months. Building something new is never easy.

Yet the three Californians believed that success was within their grasp. They left with a commitment from some of the country’s most reputable firms. That, and a store that actually worked, was going to be all they needed to turn their dreams into reality.

Bill looked at Craig, grinning. “Guess I’m movin’ to Charlottesville.”

“Yes,” Craig laughed. “I guess you are.”

Rex was quiet, thinking about all the things he didn’t know yet. He was ecstatic but worried at the same time, like a skinny little tight end on a high school football team who’s just caught his first pass, only to discover four burly defenders between himself and the goal line. He’d have to move fast or get creamed.

THE initial graphic PROJECT was all wrapped up, and I found myself examining my life for the first time in ages. I had been in business for nine years, good years for the most part. I had always earned more than my previous job, even in that first harrowing year, but the stress of owning my own business was a killer. I could never plan too far ahead, because I never knew when I would hit a dry spell. It happened often enough to keep me off balance. Sometimes I longed for a regular job with a regular paycheck, just like other people.

My family demographics had changed in those nine years. When you have eleven kids, it sometimes feels like you’re running a small country. But by ‘96, most of my kids were gone, one way or another. Six of them were grown and living on their own. Molly and Jill, our two profoundly handicapped children, had passed away—two weeks apart—the previous summer. That left our three youngest—and a wife who felt like she had lost the best job in the world when her girls had died. Both my parents and Gayle’s mother were gone as well, and her father had remarried.

It occurred to me that for the first time in decades, there was nothing in particular tying us to Southern California. It was a strange revelation. I started thinking about trees.

Craig had mentioned his future staffing needs, but I didn’t know if he was fishing. He had dangled some bait, but he’d been pretty coy. “Under the right set of circumstances,” I said, “I might be persuaded to come and work for you in Virginia.”

“Really?” He sounded pleased. “You’d be perfect for the job. I’d love to have you join our team. But could you really leave Power Graphics?”

“I’m having my second mediocre year in a row,” I said, truthfully. “My kids are mostly gone, my parents are gone, my wife has been wandering around like a lost lamb ever since we lost Jill and Molly. The only thing I’d miss about California is my church. So yes, I might.”

He asked me what my net earnings had been last year. I told him. He said that would be fine.

I told Gayle what I'd done. "Are there trees?" she asked.

"Lots of 'em."

"Sounds good to me. Let's go."

Gayle and I, as usual, were on the same wavelength. You don't adopt nine kids without an overly developed sense of adventure. "Maybe we should see if he was sincere about his offer first. All he said was, 'Fine.'"

The next morning Craig confirmed our conversation—in writing. He listed my title as VP of Marketing and threw in some pluses, including stock grants representing one percent of the company's total shares, vesting over three years. It was exactly the same deal Joe Page had. Gayle had already called information for the number of a realtor in Charlottesville.

Less than a week passed before Craig asked Joe and me to fly with him up to San Jose to attend a trade show displaying the latest Web technologies. Rex, still living in San Francisco, was going to meet us there. I got to LAX in plenty of time, went to the gate, and found Joe. We waited for Craig to arrive, but he didn't show. They called our flight. Still no Craig. Last call, but no boss in sight. Finally, at the last possible moment, Craig came strolling up to the gate and got on board.

"Cutting it a little close, aren't you?" I asked.

He smiled. "I've flown all over the world, traveled in over 120 countries, been in scores of airports, and caught thousands of flights. In all that time, I've only missed one."

There was a pregnant pause before he spoke again. "That one crashed."

"Crashed! You've gotta be kidding."

As we flew on to San Jose, he told me the story. "I went to Africa one summer during college. One night at Victoria Falls, in what was then Rhodesia, I was watching the moon create swirling rainbows at the base of the falls with a girl I'd met. I was bitten by a Malaria-carrying Tste-tste fly. Two weeks later, I found myself wracked with fever, doubled over in pain.

"Unfortunately, I was now in one of the most primitive and remote places on earth, Ghondor, Ethiopia, chasing down rumors about the twelfth tribe of Israel. They claimed to have the Ark of the Covenant there. Anyway, the place was so inaccessible, the only way in or out was aboard a flying relic, a DC-3. One would occasionally land in a mountain pasture if the weather was good. It was raining. So there I lay—dying."

I hadn't heard any of this before. I was riveted.

"They finally got me out. I'd lost thirty pounds. I looked so emaciated that when I reached Cairo, a ticketing agent took one look at me and changed my flight. She booked me directly back home."

"So what happened?"

"My original flight had me returning on TWA from Tel Aviv via Rome. That flight...." Craig paused to regain his composure, "That plane was the first victim of aviation terrorists. It exploded over the Aegean Sea. All seventy-seven aboard perished. Don't know why my life was spared, but I decided to make it count. I was—am—living on borrowed time."

Tste-tste flies and terrorists. The stuff of destiny. Most people, most Americans at least, would have brushed it off as a remarkable coincidence, a lucky break. Craig Winn saw the Romans 8:28 implications, “All things work together for good....” and let it shape his perspective from that day forward.

I didn’t really mind flying, but suddenly I felt better having Craig Winn in the same airplane.

A FEW WEEKS later, Joe Page and I again found ourselves together in an airplane, this time headed for Washington, D.C. We were on our way to Charlottesville, a two-hour drive south from Dulles. Craig was already there. He wanted us to get a feel for the place.

Page was on the payroll. I had agreed to start in August; it would take me that long to tidy up my affairs.

Joe and I bummed around all day Saturday in our rental car. At one point, a real estate sign led us to a vacant lot on a road called “21-Curves.” I was stunned with the beauty of the place. Looking up at heaven from this clearing in the midst of a forest of tall hardwoods was like being in a cathedral.

We met Craig for lunch at Glenmore Country Club, where he was buying an interim house while his dream home was being built on his new farm on the other side of town. He gave us his take on navigation in C’Ville: “All roads have four names and go in a circle.” I suppose that would apply to any town with a layout based on eighteenth-century wagon ruts that had been strung together and paved over.

We did a little off-roading in our rented Dodge out at Craig’s new spread. It was a huge parcel of rolling hills overgrown with waist-high tangles and hedges gone wild. There was barbed wire everywhere. Much of this had been productive farmland a hundred years ago. But now, the neglect was palpable. You had to be a visionary to see the possibilities in the place. All I saw was work, and lots of it.

The agent my wife had called found us a perfect home. It was like *déjà vu*. It had the same cathedral-like feel as the lot Joe and I had visited. I called Gayle. “Get yourself a plane ticket. I’ve found the perfect house....”

Her answer blew me away. “I trust you. If you like it, buy it.” Buying a house for a woman without her seeing it is not an exercise for the faint of heart. But that’s exactly what I did. I would not know until August whether I had chosen well or not.

I sold my business to Gloria, put my house on the market, and took my first vacation in years—driving across the country in my wife’s Continental with my three remaining kids in the back seat. It was something I had always wanted to do. I’ll never do it again—at least not with three kids in the back.

As we pulled up the drive, I could see the expression on my wife’s face changing from relief to delight to excitement. Yes! She loved the house, loved the neighborhood (she couldn’t see our neighbors), loved the sound of late-summer cicadas in the trees—and loved me.

Of course, there wasn’t enough cupboard space.