

PUBLIC ACCOUNTING REPORT

Video Captures WS+B Differentiators, Boosts Recruiting, Teamwork, Morale

MP: *'The best thing I did was get out of the way.'*

The video fades in from black: To the opening staccato chords of the Black Eyed Peas' "I Gotta Feeling," a man walks casually but purposefully down a New Jersey city street, past a local music tavern, his jacket draped over his shoulder.

He arrives at the door of **Withum Smith+Brown's** New Brunswick office. As he dons his jacket and adjusts his tie, he begins to lip sync: "I got a feeling, that tonight's gonna be a good night ..."

The man is Bill Hagaman, the managing partner and CEO of WS+B. Hagaman opens the door. The camera takes the viewer inside, where Vinnie Maresca, the firm's IT system administrator, wearing one sparking white glove *à la* Michael Jackson, dances the viewer toward the elevator and directs the camera to Tax Partner Kimberlee Phelan. Phelan spins, her long blonde hair swinging, before bounding into the elevator, where she and three others dance to the music. The elevator ascends to the third floor; the music escalates.

The doors open, and the camera tours a floor of revelers—more than 60 in all—that includes the partners-in-charge of four of the firm's locations and a host of others, some dancing on tables, in various states of celebration.

Among them: Partner Frank Boutillette, who strategically opens a long black coat to reveal—yes—lime green Grinch boxer shorts; Michelle Morris, a 23-year-old staff accountant wearing a Philadelphia Eagles jersey; and Matt Basilo, an administrative assistant, riffing gleefully on an inflatable guitar as he and two female co-workers slink backward down a hallway.

The video, done in a single, uninterrupted shot over the full five-minute

length of the song, concludes in a lobby area where the participants gather to celebrate the moment, breaking into spontaneous applause as the camera comes to rest on the firm name displayed on the lobby wall.

Is this any way for a public accounting firm to behave?

Apparently, yes.

Small Investment Yields Big Returns

The video, which WS+B created for its internal state-of-the-firm meeting in January, was an immediate hit: Made quickly, at a cost of \$3,600, the video is yielding ongoing benefits.

Posted in the Careers section of the firm's website, it's caused a notable spike in web traffic; it's been an effective tool in recruiting and business development and jolted an enduring spike to team morale. (See the "Links" box, right, for the link to the video and related links. Also see related story, p. 3.)

At least one new hire told Hagaman that the video definitely helped sway him to choose the firm's job offer over others he had.

The video also opens the door for conversation at recruiting events and showcases the firm's commitment to work-life balance.

"We've had a lot of comments saying that [WS+B] must be a fun place to work," Hagaman said.

The firm also uses the video in marketing to industry niches. It's played at trade shows for such disparate audiences as construction businesses and government accountants.

At one construction trade show, an attendee recognized a member of the

marketing staff who appeared in the video and asked for her autograph, Hagaman recalled.

The uptick in morale that the video inspired lasted through tax season, Hagaman said. Having four partners who run offices in the video "helped to humanize them, to make staff feel like the partners are normal people," he pointed out.

To help sustain morale through tax season, the firm sometimes played the song used in the video over its PA system.

Video Highlights Individuality

Hagaman attributes the success of the video to its fun, free-spirited tone, which captures the "unique culture within the firm ... that is difficult for us to verbalize," he said.

Hagaman had no concerns about the video playing counter to the stereotypes about accountants.

"We didn't have any debate over whether the video was too informal. It's who we are. We add value to clients and attempt to be very personal. It's a differentiator for us in the marketplace," he said.

The idea for the video originated with Dan Vitale, partner-in-charge of the firm's Toms River, N.J., office. Vitale saw an inspiring video on NBC's *Today Show* in November and asked the marketing department if WS+B could produce a video of its own in time for its January state-of-the-firm meeting.

Creative Manager Jin Park and Sarah Cirelli, senior marketing coordinator for interactive marketing, produced the WS+B video and watched the *Today Show* clip repeatedly before devoting a

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One of the final shots in WS+B's video, shot in the lobby of the firm's New Brunswick, N.J., office.



Managing Partner Bill Hagaman lip syncs to the music in one of video's opening scenes.

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couple of days to mapping out the timing of their firm's version, Cirelli said. They also sent a broadcast e-mail to staff members asking for replies from anyone who would want to participate in the video, but it didn't reveal much detail.

The firm rented a "steady" camera and hired a cameraman, who later added the credits, which were the only production feature of the video.

On a weekday morning in December, staff from several offices met at the New Brunswick office to shoot the video. It took only three or four takes to get the version they wanted, Cirelli said. They knew they had it when the

staff broke into applause and cheering at the end of the take.

"That didn't happen any of the other [takes]," Cirelli said. "It wasn't planned. It was such a cool moment to come together... [Hagaman] mentioned that it was one of his proudest moments with the firm."

The video includes partners and staff of all ages but smacks of youthful abandon. That's no accident, said Hagaman.

"The best thing I did was get out of the way. I left it to the younger people to develop it, let them be creative on their own. That was a good reason for the success of the video," he said.

See **WSB VIDEO**, page 3

WS+B's Viral Video Odyssey Generates Global Exposure

Hits lead to Google optimization and Rachel Ray.

Withum Smith+Brown's "I Gotta Feeling" video was made for internal consumption at its state-of-the-firm meeting in January, but it also generated significant web traffic that led to exposure for the firm that you can't put a price on. (See related story, p. 1.)

"We had our website developer on call for the night of that event," said Sarah Cirelli, senior marketing coordinator, interactive marketing, who co-produced the video. After the meeting, she sent the link to everybody in the firm.

"The next morning, hits on the website were incredible," she said.

The firm tallied 4,777 hits on the video in the first two weeks of January, most of those coming in first day or so after the event. At press time, the video, posted on the firm's Careers page, has been viewed more than 13,000 times.

The firm posted the video through the Twitter account of Bill Hagaman, managing partner and CEO (Twitter: @bhagaman), on Hagaman's blogs (www.ceothinks.com and www.double-taxation.com) and on the firm's Facebook page.

Hits + Visibility = Rachel Ray

The increase in web traffic raised the firm's search engine optimization, improving the firm's position in search engine results.

This higher visibility and the fun attitude of the video itself led to the *Rachel*

Ray Show choosing the firm for a tax season "glam squad" surprise makeover segment for various staff members, Cirelli said. (See *PAR*, Feb. 28, 2011.)

"Because of all the traffic and click-throughs from the video, we appeared much higher in Google's rankings than we would have before," Cirelli said. "Luckily for us, when Rachel Ray was searching for an accounting firm, they stumbled across us and thought our culture fit the best."

The segment aired on April 8. A video of that segment and a "bonus" WS+B makeover are posted on Ray's site (See "Links" box, p. 3.)

The viral nature of the video has had some comic results too, such as when a competitor's child posted the video on Facebook, Cirelli said.

"We had so much fun watching it fly around the Twitter atmosphere," Cirelli said. "We kept a search tag going just to watch it being forwarded."

"We kept getting positive comments from other CPAs and our competitors," Hagaman said. "It has been very gratifying."

What's Next?

As with any media success, an immediate dilemma is how to top it next time. While the WS+B video went from idea to reality in less than two months, the marketing team is already working on

Public Accounting Report WS+B Five-Year Growth		
Year	Net Revenue (\$mil)	% Change
2007	60.1	13.2
2008	70.2	16.8
1009	72.0	2.5
2010	72.4	0.6
2011	76.3	5.4

Source: Firm data, PAR research

Public Accounting Report WS+B Snapshot	
Headquarters	Princeton, N.J.
Full-Time Equity Partners	32
Total Partners	69
Professionals	213
Total Staff	350
Offices	13

Source: Firm data, PAR research

the follow-up for next January's annual firm meeting.

No doubt they'll have plenty of takers when they send out the email asking who wants to participate in that one.

"Last year people were a little hesitant," Cirelli said. "But after seeing the video, the fun, and the impact, we have a lot more people who want to participate." ■

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The video provides "a really good example of what's in store for our firm for the future. We're not afraid to think outside of the box," said Wilson, a 23-year-old accountant in the firm's Summerville, N.J. office.

Much of the video's charm arises from the firm's encouraging participants to showcase their individuality in the performance. Participants were told to dress in a way that defines them.

The Philadelphia Eagles jersey Morris wore in the video alluded to her membership on the NFL team's cheerleading squad. Cirelli, a Zumba instructor, appeared in her Zumba wear.

When the video aired at the state-of-the-firm meeting, the response was immediate.

"It starts with [Hagaman], and you don't know where they're going with it," said Basilo. "When he started singing along, the entire room broke into laughter."

Added Morris: "You couldn't help but laugh at everyone looking ridiculous, totally out of their comfort zones. That's the best thing—you were laughing *with* them, not *at* them."

Like his staff, Hagaman was out of his comfort zone in the video but remained committed to the performance.

"I wish we could have had one more take so I could have gotten it right. I'm a bit of a perfectionist," he said.

Withum Smith + Brown video:
http://www.withum.com/popupvid_music-video.html

Original Today Show video:
http://allday.today.com/_news/2010/11/19/5494298-ive-got-a-feeling-that-todays-going-viral

Rachel Ray videos featuring WS+B staff:
<http://rachaelayshow.com/show/segments/view/grettas-accountant-makeovers/>
<http://rachaelayshow.com/show/segments/view/only-online-bonus-accountant-makeover/>

WS+B MP/CEO Bill Hagaman's blogs
www.ceothinks.com
www.double-taxation.com

Editor's Note: This video is a must-see. We strongly recommend you take five minutes to watch it. ■