

# Be nimble, act fast and be prepared for a new reality every day

Jim Fairbrother started out writing greeting cards one summer. Then he advanced to writing blurbs for paperback covers. He was director of advertising and promotion for some large book publishers before he switched from being a client to being on the agency side.

In working at advertising agencies, he discovered that it was really important to him to work with people who had a good sense of humor and knew how to have fun. And that's still important to him.

Coming from a long line of entrepreneurs, Fairbrother knew he would one day have his own firm. The first day he joined an ad agency, he shook hands on a deal to eventually buy out the owner. Three years later, at 29, he became president of Jameson Advertising, a boutique agency in Manhattan. After spending weekends in Columbia County for a few years, Fairbrother decided to move his agency there.

When asked his thoughts about working in the Capital Region, he is a one-man ad campaign. "This is the greatest place to live in the world. The Capital Region has everything: access, talent, environment, culture, education." He thinks that as Tech Valley grows, so will the renown of the Capital Region.

Asked about stress relievers, Fairbrother learned what works from dog-sledding in northern Minnesota in 20 below zero temperatures, miles from any civilized comforts. "... There is such a thing as good stress and bad stress. Bad stress is when you are doing something you don't want to do. Good stress is when you're doing exactly what you want to do and love. Good stress keeps you from freezing or starving to death, and helps you keep the dogs under control."

His idea of fun is baseball. He lives for baseball season (he says he thinks baseball every day) and also plays fantasy baseball.

## ABOUT THE JOB

### How many people do you have on staff?

Seven. When it's slow, it feels like 30; when it's busy, it feels like 2½.

### What is your company's specialty?

Branding. Lots of companies (and indeed many people with a desktop computer and a few graphics programs) call themselves branding experts, but to me, branding is something that requires broad expertise in all aspects of marketing communications, not just logo design, for example, but strategic marketing, PR, direct marketing and advertising. We also have a subsidiary company called SoundBrand, which helps companies find their unique voice and sound signature and use it effectively in all audio applications, from the phone to the Web to broadcast advertising.

### What is your target market?

We are generalists by category and experts in the field of branding. Thus our targets can be in any category, or region or market. We work with some very old established firms, like Laidlaw & Co., the second-oldest investment bank in America, to start-up tech firms like Rethink Technologies. We also have deep experience in education, financial services and health care. Above all, we look to partner with companies and even nonprofit organizations that are looking to grow through integrated branding and marketing initiatives, from strategy through creative and implementation, rather than on a project-to-project basis. We're best used when we are in the strategic driver's seat, rather than being a passenger on the bus.

### Tell us about a few of your most interesting, unique campaigns locally:

We have had a recent string of successes

## ON THE JOB

**Name:** James A. Fairbrother  
**Title, business:** Chairman, CEO and creative director Fairbrother & Co. LLC, Chatham  
**Web site:** www.fairbrother.com



helping to increase enrollment at Hudson Valley Community College, and we have been honored with the Gold Award in the national Admissions Marketing Awards competition, winning three years in a row for Best Advertising Campaign, including a Best of Show citation this year. The challenge with a large organization serving a diversity of constituencies is to keep a consistent branding message and image running through many different components of the communications mix, from Web to TV, radio and print advertising to direct mail and admissions materials. While the targets may be very different—from a 17-year-old thinking about a four-year degree to a mid-career manager looking to improve his or her opportunities, to a boomer nearing retirement looking for a new avocation—the core strategic brand message is consistent, that Hudson Valley provides "directions for life."

We also recently successfully changed a credit union's identity and have been fueling their continued growth in the region. First Teachers Federal Credit Union was re-branded by us as **First New York FCU**, in 2005. We created a positioning concept for them, "Bank where you're a member. Not a number," which was designed to encourage those fed up with big-bank consolidations and impersonal treatment to try the credit union. We have developed TV, radio, billboards and print ads in support of the campaign, and are helping First New York launch two new branches in the region. And membership in the credit union is growing dramatically.

## DAILY WORK

### What's the best part of your job?

Bagging the big idea. When the lightbulb goes on, there is nothing more exciting or exhilarating in this business.

### What's the least favorite part?

Not prevailing. Getting rebuffed in a pitch of creative concepts, or a new business shoot-out. I hate losing.

## GOALS

### What are your goals for the company?

My short-term and long-term goals are the same: managed growth. Acquire new business while maintaining existing client relationships.

### What is the biggest change you have seen in the advertising market in the past decade?

Advertising has gotten a bad rap in the past decade, and it's getting worse. It started with the dot-com implosion, when it became fashionable to say that advertising doesn't work, because dozens of dot-coms spent millions on Super Bowl spots and went bust. More recently, the doom-sayers would have you believe that online marketing is replacing advertising. Of course, online marketing is advertising, it's just using different tools and techniques. But this business is cyclical. Advertising's star will rise again—soon—and leading companies will



Above, Fairbrother behind a wire sculpture; below, with account executive Mary Cinadr. "When the lightbulb goes on, there is nothing more exciting or exhilarating in this business," says Fairbrother.

Photos by Donna Abbott Vlahos

lead because they understand the power of branding and marketing and advertising to grow a business.

### What have you done to weather the difficult economic times?

Our business is always a fluid business. Expansion, contraction, seasonality: There are constant forces at work that require us to be nimble, to act fast, and to be prepared for a new reality every day. We are the Navy SEALs of the ad business, a team of highly talented professionals that will work together to get it done no matter what obstacles we face.

### What are the challenges facing the advertising industry now?

The same ones that we have always faced: finding clients and companies and organizations that value good ideas and creativity and understand how they can help them achieve their goals.

## PERSONAL

### Stress reducers:

I learned while dog-sledding in northern

Minnesota in 20-below-zero temperatures and miles from any civilized comforts, that there is such a thing as good stress and bad stress. Bad stress is when you are doing something you don't want to do. Good stress is when you're doing exactly what you want to do and love. Good stress keeps you from freezing or starving to death, and helps you keep the dogs under control.

### Favorite pastime:

I live for the baseball season, and I play fantasy baseball; so even in the weeks before pitchers and catchers report, I can still think and talk (and e-mail) baseball every day.

### Family:

Four children, ranging from 2 to 20—Carter, Eliza, Patience and Alison. And a wife, Ivy, who keeps me happy, healthy and sane—and from taking myself too seriously.

### Automobile:

When my '59 Chevy Apache pickup truck isn't working (well, OK, it's almost never working), I drive a Saab station wagon.