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Handwriting Expert Helps DMers See the Writing on the Wall

Oct. 17, 2005

By: Mickey Alam Khan
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ATLANTA – Expect Sarah Holmes to be the most sought-after woman at DMA · 05.

An estimated 250 people waited in line to spend about five minutes with her at last year's DMA annual conference and exhibition in New Orleans. Some were curious to meet with her, others anxious.

Holmes was going to analyze their handwriting.

She is doing the same thing this year, holding court at printer and supply chain manager Banta Corp.'s booth 1106 in Atlanta's Georgia World Congress Center.

"Last time I was very impressed with the quality of handwriting at the show – very dynamic, very entrepreneurial," Holmes said. "They probably were talented at coordinating ideas and people. There were movers and shakers, but also a handful of introverts."

Duxbury, MA-based Holmes knows writing like few people do. She is vice president of handwriting and document examining firm Pentec Inc. So what she saw at last year's DMA annual show and this year's Annual Catalog Conference – both times at Banta's booth – didn't surprise her.

Extroverts in the DM crowd had writing with forward movement, original connections and moderate to large script, Holmes said. By contrast, introverts mostly had a large upper-case letter and the rest of the word in much smaller writing. Or they had a very large signature compared with the accompanying copy.

"It's a front-stage personality in contrast to the handwriting, which is the true self," Holmes said of the introverts' oversized signatures.

How different was the men's writing from the women's?

"Generally, the women's writing was more demonstrative and expressive, whereas the men's writing was more factual and more reflective," Holmes said.

Each writing sample takes about five minutes to analyze and convey to the giver. But sometimes Holmes does the job in three minutes if there's a longer line.

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Interestingly, as many men were queuing up last year as women.

"Often a lot of men step up to the booth because their colleagues drag them along and often they're pleasantly surprised because their handwriting reflects who they are," Holmes said.

She is prepared for some pushback from those queuing, especially from a DM industry that trusts numbers and measurable yardsticks more than anything else.

"Many of them are skeptical because they haven't had knowledge of how handwriting reflects their personality," Holmes said. "And when they leave, they realize it's as much of a statement about who they are as is their body language, preferred style of dress and facial gestures."

It is typical at DMA shows, as well as others like the interactive-focused ad:tech, to use decoys to draw traffic. Exhibitors use stuffed toys, T-shirts, miniature golf sessions, sweepstakes, key chains, bags, mint, fluorescent pens or magicians. Holmes does the magic for Banta.

"My primary goal is to help make this the most effective show as possible for Banta, encouraging people to come into the booth so that they can learn from the sales team what Banta has to offer the direct marketing community," Holmes said.

"I want them to remember Banta's booth, that it was both educational and fun," she said.

Banta hasn't disclosed how many leads it has generated since using Holmes' services at three DMA-run shows and one Booktech event in New York.

"It must be an effective draw for Banta, because otherwise they wouldn't have invited me back," Holmes said.

Pentec is run by Holmes and her mother, Ruth, who offers her services for forensic and employee consultation out of Bloomfield, MI. The firm analyzes handwriting for Michigan's Comerica Bank, Michigan Bankers Association and the Michigan Association of Community Bankers.

Besides Banta, Holmes' other direct marketing client was database marketing giant Acxiom. She was at the company's booth this past January during the National Retail Federation's Big Show in New York.

Also, she analyzed handwriting for visitors to LP Innovations' booth at the NRF's recent Loss Prevention conference.

"The bottom line is, people just want to be seen," Holmes said. "It doesn't matter what industry they're in. So with a busy four days at a huge conference, for 5 minutes it's just about them."

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