


TRUE
TEXAS
THE
EVOLUTION
OF A
BRAND





By Joan Henderson

Four years ago, we hired a creative director at *Texas Highways* to help us bring much-needed continuity to everything we do. As any regional publisher today, our monthly subscriber-based magazine is just one of the spokes on our wheel. We also produce a quarterly printed events calendar, a robust online

presence, an email program — not to mention our various promotional brochures and maps. Although these were being produced by the same staff, each had its own look and feel. They were disparate elements lacking not just a consistent design but a unifying mission. What was the central goal we were trying to achieve in all of these efforts?

Under the guidance of our new creative guru, our staff explored this question, taking stock of our entities and looking to other regional and travel publications for inspiration and guidance. After a collaborative (and fun) process, we landed on this: As the official travel magazine of Texas, we need our publication — and all of our other efforts — to focus squarely on celebrating what is authentic and unique about Texas. The people, the places, and wide-open spaces. That's the promise we're making. And we need to do it in a way that binds the elements of our brand and ignites enthusiasm among our readers.



Along the path of our discovery process, we had a serendipitous find. In looking back over our assets, we came upon a title we had used for a feature series starting in 2010. It was called “True Texas.” This moniker captures the essence of **TM** what we want to be and what we want to deliver to our audience. The phrase, and the philosophy, has since not only driven our creative process, it has helped us evolve our brand.

A WHOLE OTHER COUNTRY

We started with design, debuting a new look in the September 2013 issue of *Texas Highways*. The major redesign included a bold new logo, sweeping feature openers, updated departments, and multiple visual entry and exit points for the reader. Then, we extended the same look and feel to all of our other entities.

Suddenly our magazine, events guide, website, newsletter, and social media properties began to have a consistent identity and voice. This laid a solid groundwork for us to see where we wanted to take the brand next. The simple but impactful next step? We decided to apply our True Texas approach to the products we purchase to sell in our online store. Believe it or not, this turned out to be a critical component of our evolution.

While our editorial had always focused on Texas, our online store featured assorted Texas-themed tchotchkes made all over the world. As an example, readers could purchase a wildflower tote bag produced in North Carolina but not one made in Texas. The store carried t-shirts, aprons, puzzles, and ornaments, but all were mass produced, including coffee mugs and hats sporting the famous Davy Crockett quote, “You may all go to hell, and I will go to Texas.” Nearly all of the items were purchased through product companies rather than from individual artists.





Our first True Texas products included three Austin-based companies: Hemlock & Heather, a husband and wife team who create Texas-shaped wall hangings from reclaimed wood; Coulbury Design, a couple who produce handcrafted rolling pins that are as artistic as they are functional; and Kimball Prints, all-natural tea towels hand printed in Carolyn Kimball's studio in east Austin.



Texas Highways expanded its True Texas product line with jewelry, like these Texas charms by Amanda Deer Jewelry; t-shirts made from Texas-grown organic cotton; high-end leather products by Satchel & Page; and tote bags by Sarahjanes Oilcloth. Thanks to online sharing, where the artists and readers are posting about the products on platforms like Instagram (right), Texas Highways' social media engagement has increased by over 50 percent.

In January 2014, we began to imagine integrating our ancillary product division with our overarching vision of True Texas. Essentially, we would back up our claim of being singularly focused on Texas by investing in local talent. And we hoped this would be evident to even the most casual of readers when we rolled out our new products. We suspected that the commitment, so well aligned with our identity, would have a far-reaching impact on the entire brand.

GOING TO TRUE TEXAS

We decided to source the vast majority of our products (currently 92 percent) from Texas-based artists and craftspeople who make their living producing quality goods. We then developed some simple guidelines for an item to be considered True Texas:

- Products must be designed and created in Texas.
- Source material (textiles, metal, etc.) may come from outside of Texas as long as the artist creates the finished product in Texas.
- Artisans must be able to meet the demand for sales.

Since the magazine is housed in the Travel Information Division of the Texas Department of Transportation, all products have to fit our legislatively approved categories, which include travel-related products, home décor, outdoor accessories, apparel, jewelry, and accessories.

Right away, we were delighted at how easy it was to find quality products. We scouted boutique retail stores and online marketplaces and attended

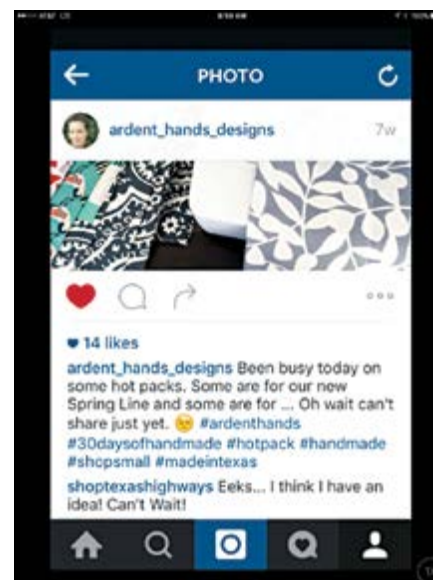
craft fairs and farmers' markets. The more daunting challenge has been our required, lengthy purchasing process. Once we identify an artist, we do an internal review of the product, obtain approval from the division director, guide the artist through registering as a vendor, and create a contract with the help of the procurement division. Once the initial contract is in place, though, ordering and reordering products from the vendor is fairly simple. We may not be as nimble as our counterparts in the private sector, but we are tenacious.

By early summer of that first year, we had engaged nearly 10 artists and were able to start unveiling the first wave of items in our new product line.

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From there, we continued to expand the product line, adding high-end leather goods, hand-thrown pottery, jewelry, soy candles, pocket knives, books, and t-shirts made from Texas-grown cotton. We enlisted real Texans for our photo shoots, held at historic destinations like Luckenbach, Texas — population, 3.

Our team developed two types of house advertisements to drive traffic to our online store: “maker” ads and multi-product ads. Our “maker” ads feature a



single artist or company on a full-page, front-of-book ad that focuses on the artist's personal story, which resonates with our readers. Our multiproduct ads are placed in the back of the book and feature six to eight items. The combination of these two types of ads works well for us. Traffic to our online store goes up after the release of every issue, and, in most cases, the items featured in the issue outsell other items in the store for that month.

With a few exceptions, we select just one or two items from each artist for inclusion in our store, and we make sure our prices are in line with the artist's own retail pricing. Customers frequently purchase an item from us and then seek out the artist for additional items we don't carry.

It's important to mention that we focus on cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with the artists we feature. We get great products at wholesale prices, and the artists get new customers through a built-in marketing engine. Here's some feedback we received from one artist, Amanda Deer, whose handcrafted Texas-shaped necklaces appear in our store:

Hi all,

I had no idea how well my necklaces would sell in Texas Highways!

The day the magazine came out, I was at a coffee shop with friends, and my phone kept buzzing (I get a message each time I make a sale). I thought, surely this can't be right.

I got home and found it was true: I had sold a ton of the Texas necklaces. I was totally blown away.

I have also been contacted by a few boutiques around Texas that want to carry my line after seeing my ad in the magazine.

This has really been an amazing boost for me and my small business, and I can't thank you enough.

Amanda

NOT JUST "ALL HAT..."

Our ancillary product division, which always seemed, well, ancillary, has become a primary component of

our brand ecosystem. By August 2015, at the end of the first full fiscal year with the new product line, the division had generated a year-over-year revenue increase of 28 percent. And, in a good sign that this year may be strong as well, we had our best sales day in history on Black Friday 2015. To help boost visibility, we now have a pop-up store that makes appearances at our TxDOT offices and at conferences and events. Sales aren't huge, but the increased awareness has been great. We've had people tell us they didn't realize we carried products — which stings a bit since we've had a gift shop for decades — but we see this feedback as further validation that "buying local" resonates and gets people's attention.

In the bigger picture, our refocused brand mission is helping us to engage and excite our audience. We see this primarily online, where engagement is up across all platforms. Our artists, many of whom are millennials, are talking, posting, and tweeting about being featured in the magazine, increasing our visibility and the buzz around our brand. And we're getting traction with "reader's choice" editorial packages, like our "Texas Top 40 Travel Destinations" and "Texas Top 40 Comfort Food Destinations," which encourage followers (and their friends) to submit votes online. Entire communities have rallied their support systems, resulting in some exciting and controversial top five destination winners. In FY15,

The Texas Highways online store sells over 100 Texas-made products, including these True Texas Heroes Mugs, which are inspired by screen prints created by Texas Highways Senior Editor Lori Moffatt.



rolling 12-month pageviews on our website were up 51.44 percent and growth across all social media platforms increased by more than 50 percent.

Our advertising clients are responding, too. Ad sales revenue has risen year-over-year since our redesign in late 2013. A snapshot of the FY14-FY15 period shows a print ad sales revenue increase of 25 percent for *Texas Highways*. Online ad revenue climbed 15.25 percent, and our events calendar ad revenue rose by more than 26 percent. Fiscal year 2016 is on track for another big increase across all platforms.

EVERYTHING'S BIGGER

Here's what we've learned: If you want to evolve your brand, you need to start somewhere, and you need to stay true to who you are. For us, that meant crystalizing our mission as being all-Texas-all-the-time and then applying that to everything we do, including our products program.

We know it may take years for us to fully realize the impact of our brand evolution, but early results look very promising. We got more in touch with our brand DNA, updated our look, and tapped into the “buy local” trend. True Texas isn't just a tagline, it's an organic byproduct of who we are and what we represent. As such, True Texas will continue to be a critical part of our evolving brand.

Joan Henderson was named travel information division director for the Texas Department Of Transportation in 2016 and previously held the position of Texas Highways publisher. Before moving to Texas in 2014, she served as publisher of Oklahoma Today for nearly two decades. Henderson serves on the president's council of the International Regional Magazine Association and served for 10 years on the board of directors of MPA-IMAG. Connect at tinyurl.com/linkedin-henderson.

