

ROLL CALL

Venn Strategies Explores the Fine Art of Lobbying

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Step inside the ultramodern foyer of the Venn Strategies office on 15th Street Northwest and you'll be struck by the deep red walls, sleek furnishings and vibrant abstract paintings.

But when it comes to its art, Venn, a majority female lobbying shop that specializes in tax and health care policy, does more than just boast great pictures.

It has an exhibition schedule.

That's right: For the past nine months its reception area also has doubled as a small-scale gallery, with revolving displays of D.C.-based artists' work.

The idea has proved so popular that the space, which has room for about a dozen works on its walls, is booked through next summer, with each showing slated to run for about two months.

The artists-in-residence program is the brainchild of Venn Vice President Melissa Bonicelli, a tax lobbyist at the firm who paints on the side. It allows local artists an opportunity to display their work, while giving Venn the added benefit of an ever-changing menu of fine art, she says.

Though Venn isn't involved in marketing the work, Bonicelli says: "Obviously we want to help them sell if they can." Accordingly, she keeps a price list of the artists' work in her office, just in case any potential buyers want "an idea of how much it is."

So far, however, "I think the artists end up selling more to people at the firm," says Venn co-founder and principal Stephanie Silverman, who commissioned one of the previous artists on display to create a piece for her mother's birthday this year.

Bonicelli, whose own office features her elegant geometric and floral mixed-media canvases, was inspired to launch the program after seeing a similar concept at the Clarendon Grill. Last winter, when the firm was moving into its current digs, she mentioned the idea to Sandra Swirski, a Venn principal and co-founder, who immediately was receptive, Bonicelli says.

Since January, the firm has shown work by four artists, including the current exhibition of acrylic abstract expressionist paintings by Marion van Ruiten of the Independent Artists Forum.

"It's to get exposure. That's the main thing ... exposure to a different clientele and different people — those who work there and those who come in and out," van Ruiten says.

Next up in November: Martha Oatway an artist represented by the Washington Printmakers Gallery whose circular-themed work was a natural fit for a firm whose name and logo is derived from the interlocking circles of the Venn diagram.

Local gallery directors say exhibiting in K Street offices is just another way for their artists to expand the potential market for their work.

“Some of the battle is putting [art] in places to let people know you are there,” says Touchstone Gallery Director Sandy Rossi, who currently is in discussions with Venn to show two of the gallery’s artists next year. She praised the idea as a good way for artists to introduce their work to “those who otherwise might not be getting the time or [might not] realize their interest in art.”

As head of Venn’s art program, Bonicelli — who previously worked as legislative director to former House Ways and Means Chairman Bill Archer (R-Texas) — spends about eight hours a month visiting galleries to scout for new talent, leafing through portfolios and helping mount new shows when it’s time to switch artists.

Bonicelli’s only criteria for what gets picked is that “we don’t want anything that’s going to be too controversial,” she says. That means “no nudes” or “anything really depressing.”

“We want it to be something where people will feel welcome and comfortable and happy when they come in,” she says.

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