



(RE)MAKING A NAME FOR THEMSELVES

Rebranding a creative agency is hard, risky—and very time-consuming. Meet two principals who took the leap this year, repositioning their firms for growth and longevity.

If you've ever contributed to a brand development or relaunch project, you know how brain-draining and time-consuming that work can be. Now imagine applying that work to your own creative agency. Rethinking your position in the market. Shifting your client focus. Choosing a new name. Palms sweating yet?

There's a reason why rebranding is such a rarity among creative firms—several reasons, actually. Rebranding is really hard work. More than simply creating a nifty new logo, rebranding requires a discomforting level of introspection. Rebranding is scary, especially if the firm abandons a longstanding identity

or shifts market focus. And it requires dedicated time and attention that compete with the resources allocated to revenue-generating client work.

So why go through the pain? We posed that question to two creative agencies that launched new identities this year—Enrich (formerly Schisla Design Studio) and Mth^o (formerly Morris Communication). While their reasons for rebranding are quite different, the principals of those two studios pulled back the curtain to reveal how they made the big change, why it was time and what their expectations are for the future.

REBRANDING: IT'S NOT EASY

While designers might be eager to redesign their business cards, rebranding a creative agency involves more strategic thinking than it does design work. Often, it's prompted by a challenging business circumstance—the loss of a major client that leads to a new market focus, or the desire of a principal to exit the firm.

It requires introspection. Contemplating a change in direction—focusing on a market niche, for example, or expanding into a new client base—prompts an analysis of what's been working for the firm ... and what hasn't. The rebranding process asks tough questions: Have we been going in the wrong direction? Does our portfolio sync up with market demands (in other words, can we make money doing the work we like best)? Do we need to let go of some older clients to free up capacity to pursue new work? Do we have the right people on the team to move forward?

It's a pain in the neck. If you rename your business, you'll need to retain an attorney to help with the trademark search and filing. You also may need to register a new DBA ('doing business as') name with your state or local government. If your city requires a business license or permit, you'll need to update that paperwork, and likewise with federal, state and local tax-collecting agencies. (For more information, visit SBA.gov and search 'register small business.')

Think of other vendors and service providers you work with: the bank, the phone company, payroll service, FedEx—you'll need to alert all of them if you change your agency's name so you can continue depositing checks, paying employees and receiving packages.

It's risky. With any reinvention, there's a risk of losing equity built under the old identity. A name change is particularly challenging, as clients and prospects have previously identified with the old moniker. An agency that shifts to new markets may worry about alienating existing customers that don't fall into those categories. Will clients change your contact info in their databases or bookmark your new URL? That's why rebranding should go hand in hand with a careful launch strategy that introduces the new identity.

It takes time away from client work. Both of the firms featured here ran their rebranding project through the usual strategic and creative processes they apply to outside projects. Without that discipline, they say, the work would never have been completed.

REBRANDING: IT PAYS DIVIDENDS

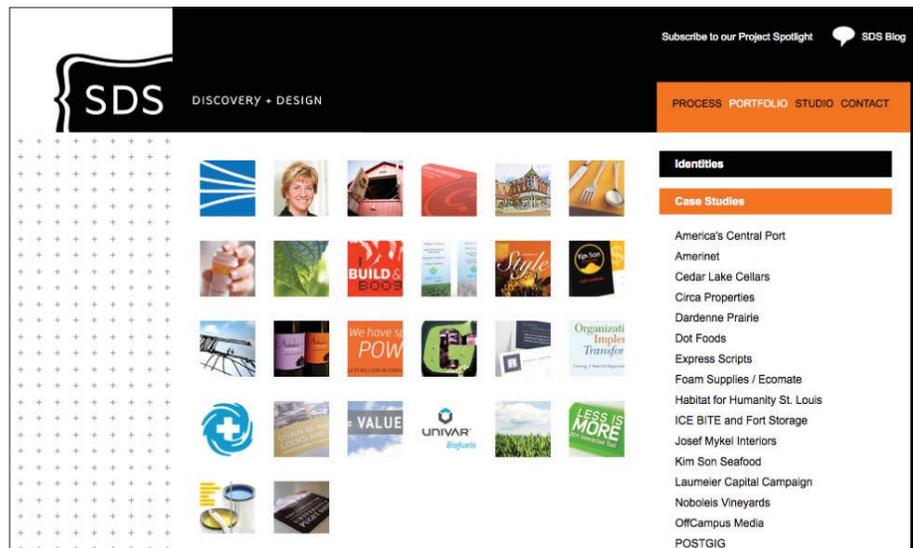
Gretchen Schisla and Steven Morris decided to move forward with rebranding their agencies, both with more than a decade's worth of equity built up. Why? Because the rewards were greater than the risks.

It allows for reinvention. Schisla Design Studio wanted to move from a generalist position to focus on work in the food and wellness categories. The firm's new brand, Enrich, better suits the specialty and expresses the team's passion and expertise.

It catches the identity up with the work. Morris' firm has evolved beyond strictly design work and into strategic consultation, becoming a hybrid of a traditional design firm, digital agency and product incubator.

"We were very careful about this, because we didn't want our current clients to feel awkward about the change. It was important for them to understand the fine-tuning of our niche without alienating them."

GRETCHEN SCHISLA



But with the words 'design,' 'creative' and 'communication' in previous iterations of his company's name, Morris felt the firm's work was outpacing its identity.

It facilitates transition. When a designer launches a creative business, the default is to choose an eponymous identity. But having your own name on the door raises two challenges: First, clients assume they'll be working directly with you, and not the amazing team you've gathered. And second, when you're ready to step out of the firm, selling it to new owners is much more difficult.

Mindful of the challenges and payoffs, Schisla and Morris took the plunge and introduced new identities for their firms this year. Let's look at how each of them did it.

ENRICH: FINDING A BIGGER PURPOSE

When Gretchen Schisla left a St. Louis corporate communications firm in 2002 to establish her own design agency, she needed to quickly get up and running. So putting her own name on the door was the most expedient way to launch. Soon, she hired Kory Waschick, a talented designer she'd previously worked with, and the small firm began to develop a broad portfolio of work for a diverse client base. Schisla Design Studio focused on print and exhibit design, adding web design capabilities over time.

For the first five or six years, business was steady. Schisla says they didn't do much marketing, but instead let the work flow in through existing clients

DISCOVERY/COLLABORATION

When they set out to rebrand their agency, the team at Enrich (formerly Schisla Design Studio, above) ran the project through their typical creative process—with an added layer of introspection and self-discovery. The firm's 10th anniversary in 2012 proved an optimal time to unveil a new image. The name Enrich became a logical choice following a "dream time" session where each of the four staffers shared their interests and motivations. From there, they explored visual representations of the brand. Concepts on the left side of the mood board (opposite) show the beginning of the new identity.

and referrals. SDS built some strong and lasting relationships, which helped the firm hang in there through economic ups and downs. Senior designer Bruce Sachs joined the firm in 2006; Suzanne Duval d'Adrian came on board in 2009 to handle office support.

In 2007, SDS ran into a big hurdle that's common for design firms: They lost a major client when their key contact left the company. After not having spent much energy on marketing, the firm was challenged to bring in new work. At that point, Schisla realized she had a positioning problem because they were too similar to other firms with a horizontal market focus. "Our steadiness was an obstacle to growth," she says. "We felt good about the quality of our work and the thinking behind it, but we couldn't articulate a unique position for ourselves."

Schisla followed many of her fellow design agency principals by hiring a salesperson in 2008 to drum up new business. While the rep did drum up some leads and network on the firm's behalf, there were a couple of downsides. The salesperson didn't have deep enough expertise to talk strategy and possibilities with a prospect, and the lengthy sales cycle meant there wasn't a quick return on the cost of the salary and commission. Schisla was looking for a better solution when a friend connected her with Peleg Top, a

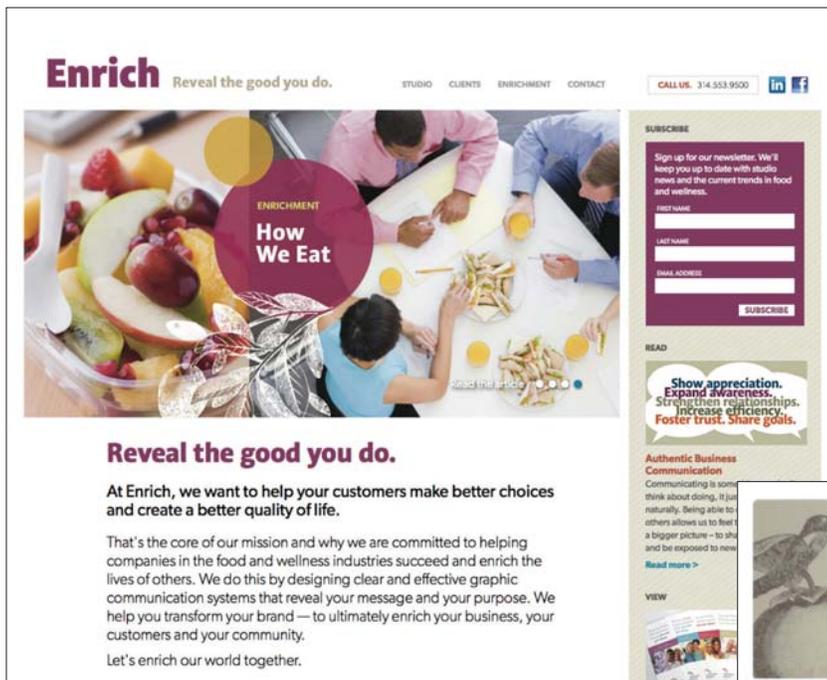
business coach for creative entrepreneurs. Top opened her mind to the possibility of rebranding and repositioning her firm.

"Peleg encouraged me to approach this discovery from a more personal, holistic viewpoint. It was so refreshing to think about what's important to me, what inspires me and how the company direction could support that. We were also aware that we have much more potential to grow as a company and do more interesting work by establishing a niche, rather than continuing as generalists in branding and design."

With Top's guidance, Schisla and her team held a series of "dream" sessions, where they explored how their individual motivations, interests and desires could translate to the firm's work. They conducted a client survey to understand how people outside the agency perceived it. They researched potential market categories and weeded out those that didn't have business potential. Through this process of discovery, common themes emerged: The team values wellness and quality of life. They enjoy their work and want to contribute meaningfully to their community and clients.

Changing the firm's name was important to Schisla for a couple of reasons: One, she envisions stepping away from the business eventually, so she wanted a name that would 'outlive' her role. And two, she wanted to focus the identity on the team creating the work. To come up with a new moniker, the group created mind maps and explored words and phrases that would capture the emerging themes, ultimately landing on the word 'enrich.' "We hit on it early," Schisla says, "and we knew that it felt right."

With the name Enrich and a market focus on food and wellness, the immediate next step was to snag the URL Enrichcreative.com and apply for the registration of the name Enrich. And Schisla engaged Andy Bartling, a positioning strategist, to help the team distill the enrich concept into language that would resonate with clients and prospects.



Reveal the good you do.

At Enrich, we want to help your customers make better choices and create a better quality of life.

That's the core of our mission and why we are committed to helping companies in the food and wellness industries succeed and enrich the lives of others. We do this by designing clear and effective graphic communication systems that reveal your message and your purpose. We help you transform your brand — to ultimately enrich your business, your customers and your community. Let's enrich our world together.

A NEW BRAND WARDROBE

In creating a new visual identity, the Enrich team started with the website and then spun off printed collateral from there. Senior designer Bruce Sachs developed the wireframe and structure; creative director Kory Waschick focused on color, type and imagery, while principal Gretchen Schisla went to work on messaging. The identity is built on a warm, earthy color palette and a mix of photography and delicate line illustrations.





ENRICH

Rebranding isn't cheap, particularly when you consider studio time (which you must). For Enrich, expenses included retaining a consultant and a trademark attorney to register the name, hiring a web programmer and printing for their business papers. Creative director Kory Waschick says that during the height of the project, she and senior designer Bruce Sachs spent 50% of their time on the rebranding. The team had a goal to average 20% to 30% of their time on the project, which jibes with their normal marketing activity.

A new website was the first visual expression of the Enrich brand. Sachs did extensive work on the wireframe structure, Waschick focused on developing the design and Schisla concentrated on messaging. A new 'Enrichment' section, with articles and resources, proved the most time-consuming part of the site.

The Enrich brand lends itself to a color palette of earth tones mixed with soft gray and eggplant. Throughout the website and identity, photos and vintage botanical illustrations are combined to convey a deeper meaning.

Says principal Gretchen Schisla of the Enrich rebranding: "It's been so much fun—it feels so natural to us because we're doing something we really believe in. I can see the relevancy to what we're doing in so many ways, and it's going to continue to unfold. I don't know where all the pieces will fit, but it feels really good."

Then it was on to the fun stuff: designing the identity, website and collateral. Creative director Kory Waschick describes an intensely collaborative experience, with all four staffers researching, gathering and developing mood boards: "We were all in the lead; we all contributed and collaborated," she says. "Color, type, illustration, imagery—we all discussed it."

A working session with Top nailed the creative approach. "We needed someone from the outside to look at what we created and tell us it worked," Waschick continues. "Once we had that reassurance, we pulled it all together."

Schisla says the team treated their own rebranding as a client project, which imposed the discipline necessary to stay focused and hit deadlines. Still, Waschick says it wasn't easy. "The project was fun at times because we allowed ourselves to explore. That's such a luxury these days. But with all of our exploration, we had a lot of ideas and they needed to be reined in. That was difficult. It was honestly the most challenging branding project we've ever worked on, because it was really hard to make choices."

Both Waschick and Schisla acknowledge the rebranding project's inherent risks. Would prospects get it? Would clients feel left behind? Would it pay off? "With a huge investment of time and money [an outside consultant, trademark attorney and web programmer, plus all the billable time devoted to the project],

we wanted to make sure that we'd do something with our new brand when we finished it," Waschick says. "You want to get through it because you've put a lot into it—and then you need to use it. We wanted to end up with something that we were proud to show off and that people would instantly connect to."

Schisla crafted a strategy to keep clients—including Univar Food Ingredients, Noboleis Winery and Cancer Support Community, informed of the process, and she enlisted several of them to contribute to case studies for the new website. "We were very careful about this, because we didn't want our current clients to feel awkward about the change," she says. "It was important for them to understand the fine-tuning of our niche without alienating them."

Four months after its February launch, Schisla says she feels like the new identity is gaining traction, and she's confident it will move the firm toward their projected annual revenue. "With some clients, it's business as usual," she says. "Others are very positive. It's prompted some of our clients to do more business with us because it shows them how serious we are about our mission. And we're getting tremendous response to our monthly newsletter—it's now more about education and information and less about our latest project.

"The best thing," she continues, "is that we can now talk enthusiastically about ourselves and our unique market position."

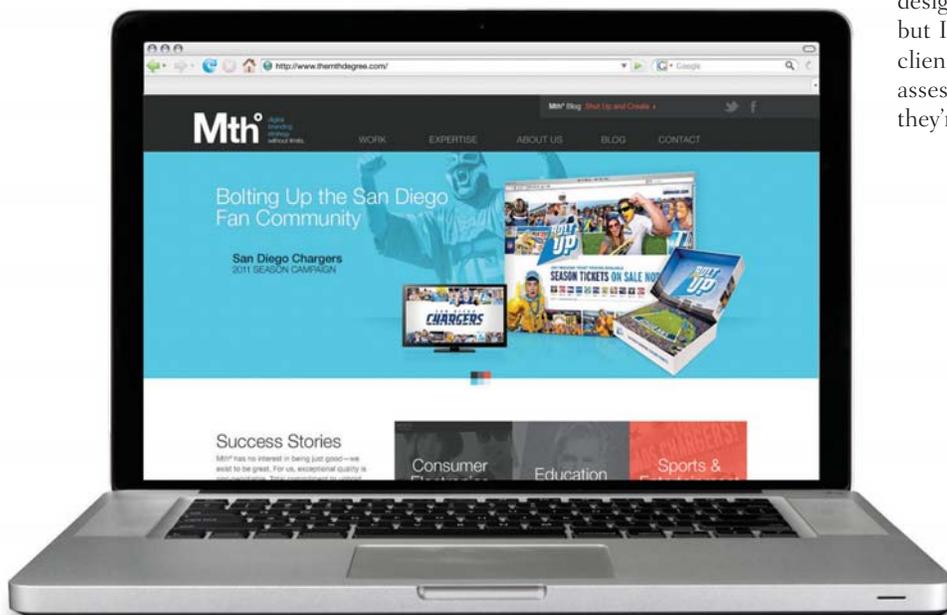
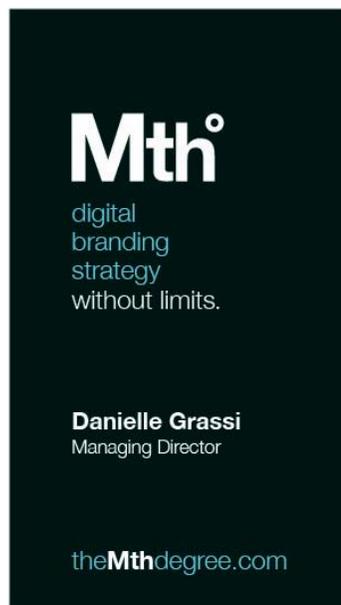
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Perhaps the biggest change to the firm's website is a series of articles, called *Enrichment*, that demonstrates the team's thinking and mission. All four Enrich staffers contribute to the series, writing about issues related to food and wellness, like Suzanne Duval d'Adrian's piece on authentic business communication and Waschick's article on food-label confusion. Each article is accompanied by a graphic that rotates through the homepage in a slideshow (above left).

Mth°

Steven Morris pursued two different directions in developing a new brand for his firm before landing on the name Mth°. A play on the phrase 'Nth Degree,' it reflects the firm's willingness to go above and beyond in developing new ideas for clients. And it's part of the team's DNA: Mth° was the name they established in 2007 for their program of pro-bono work for nonprofit clients.

Morris sat on the new brand concept for four years, waiting until he felt the firm was ready for a big change. He shared the idea confidentially with a few outsiders, some of whom told him that changing the firm's name was a risky idea. "Not all business decisions are going to be black and white," he says, "but if you're a good business leader, you go with your gut and your heart as much as you go with the information that's in front of you."



MTH°: EVOLVING THEIR CAPABILITIES

The evolution of Steven Morris's creative firm looks like this: Steven Morris Design > Morris Creative > Morris Communication > Morris.

As of August, his name is no longer on the door. Like Schisla, Morris determined that choosing a new identity that reflected the work—not the person who signs the paychecks—was a smart positioning move.

In 1994, Morris moved from Washington, DC, where he'd worked for a top design agency, to San Diego, where he launched a solo practice. The firm hit several growth spurts along the way and endured the same slowdown post 9-11 that hit much of the design field (an episode that Morris says forced him to really work on the business side). Today, the firm employs 20 full-time staff, another 20 independent contractors, and is on the verge of outgrowing its quarters in San Diego's Gaslamp District. Morris projects revenues at \$3 million for this year. The firm's clients include Sony, the newly relaunched United States Football League (for which they're creating the league branding plus all of the team logos and uniforms), the San Diego Chargers, Green Flash Brewing Co. and the San Diego Foundation.

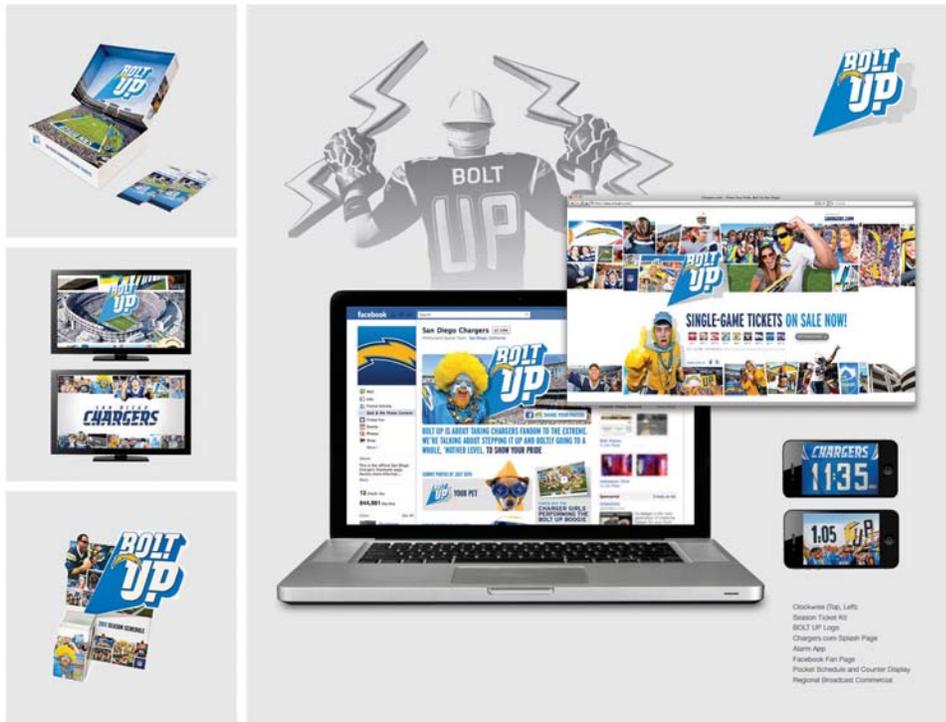
More important than its physical and financial growth, the firm has evolved its work and client relationships. Morris says the firm has shifted away from designing a single print piece or small campaign toward developing comprehensive cross-media strategies for clients. The firm has acquired capabilities along the way, often using their own marketing efforts to test-drive new skills, like creating Flash animation and building microsites. "We don't really consider ourselves a design firm anymore, though that's certainly part of the heritage that we come from," Morris says. "What we're asked to do today is quite different from what we were asked to do 10 years ago—there's so much more to it now."

"I've spent a lot of time thinking about the evolution of the design field and the business model of a design agency," he continues. "People may disagree, but I feel we're in the business of looking out for our clients, making their brands great and saving their asses. We bring the objective thinking to the table that they're too busy, or too close to their brand, to have."

A BOLD APPROACH

A gutsy name like Mth° calls for an equally bold visual expression. The team at the San Diego strategic agency formerly known as Morris chose no-nonsense Helvetica Neue and a super modern color palette of cool blue and gray with a pop of reddish orange to communicate their new brand. The agency's reinvention stemmed from evolution and growth; it's nearly outgrown its existing office space.





San Diego Chargers 2011 Campaign

Challenge

The 2011 NFL season presented many challenges due to the uncertainties surrounding the NFL lock out and a temporary ban on the use of player images in any pre-season promotions. The San Diego Chargers hired Mth Degree as a strategic partner to provide creative brand solutions that were fan-focused and captured the energy of Chargers football.

Thinking

Mth Degree created a fan-centered, interactive campaign built around the call to "BOLT UP!" It's an intentional call to action and engagement with Chargers pride. BOLT UP was designed to be emotional, evocative and, most of all, authentic—all built on a highly designed cross-media platform.

Results

BOLT UP has been fully embraced by the Chargers team and media, and has ignited the passion and pride of Chargers fans! You can see fans on game day, Facebook, Twitter, and all over San Diego County "Bolting Up" for their San Diego Chargers. During the season, Facebook fans increased from 400,000 to over 1 million. BOLT UP became the first season campaign to drive merchandise sales. Because of its popularity BOLT UP is now ingrained in Chargers culture in social media, on apparel, and in the stadium.

Bolting Up The San Diego Fan Community



CASE IN POINT

Mth° principal Steven Morris says that rebranding a creative agency involves far more than simply swapping out the logo on business cards and the website. It's an opportunity to reconsider and redesign everything, including presentation materials like project case studies (above), even contracts and proposals.

Morris had been chewing on the idea of rebranding for several years, seeking a new name that would better capture the firm's current expertise. He notes that agency names tend to fall into one of two camps: 1) the principal's first and/or last name, or 2) a clever "garage-band" kind of name, like Green T-shirt or Screaming Lizard. Morris wanted an identity that fell into a third category, one that's unique and interesting, yet descriptive of the firm's vision. Morris fully explored one option before shifting focus toward a moniker that was more distinguishing, one that his firm could truly own.

That name, Mth°, a play on the term "Nth degree," emerged from the team's efforts to go above and beyond on behalf of their clients. And it was born out of an internal pro-bono program of the same name that Morris Creative had developed in 2007 to formalize their process of serving nonprofit clients. This year, under the Mth° program, the firm launched a new name, identity and communication suite for a San Diego autism-advocacy agency called Include Autism.

As part of the rebranding process, Morris shared his thinking and invited other ideas from the team. When he pitched the Mth° name, he says, "some of the team embraced it right away, and others gave it a, 'Huh. That's interesting' response." When Morris crafted a new positioning message that tied the name into the firm's mission, Mth° became the top choice. Morris says the name leaves room for interpretation; it allows the team to riff on what the letter 'M' means.

While Mth° may require a bit of up-front explanation, it reflects their approach to the work. "Mth° really comes back to this concept of working without limits," Morris says. "And there's this aspect of creativity and innovation. Creative agencies are constantly asked to rise to the occasion and come up with new ideas. The biggest value we bring to any client is objectivity and forward thinking."

The team quickly got to work, divided the massive rebranding project among themselves, and managed to get everything—from the new wordmark to a website to all new business papers—done in time for an August launch. "You have to be a little bit crazy to want to do this for yourself in the midst of being incredibly busy," Morris says. "I give complete credit to the team."

Like Enrich, Mth° is an identity that's broad, yet descriptive and flexible enough to allow the firm to change and grow. "This is it for a long, long time," Morris says. "We're carving this relatively in stone. The agency will continue to evolve, even into products or systems or digital development, but the name/brand can flex with that." **HOW**

Bryn Mooth is an independent journalist and copywriter focused on food, wellness and design. She is HOW's former editor. www.brynmooth.com

ENRICH ST. LOUIS www.enrichcreative.com

MTH° SAN DIEGO www.theMthdegree.com