

Branding Case Study Profile

Park: Golden Gate National Recreation Area,
San Francisco, San Mateo and Marin counties, California

Branding Images:

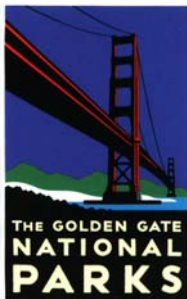


Problem Addressed and Unifying Concept:

Prior to the branding program, most people were unaware that many distinct features and user destinations within Golden Gate National Recreation Area on both sides of the Golden Gate Bridge, including the Presidio, Fort Point, Lands End, and the Marin Headlands were part of the Park. The challenge for Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) and its non-profit partner the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, was to raise awareness of each of its component units while building a public awareness/recognition brand identity for the entire Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

“The site awareness for Alcatraz and Muir Woods was strong, but the collective GGNRA identity was weak. So, we spent a lot of time trying to make that collective identity known by dealing with GGNRA as one overall park,” said Greg Moore, Executive Director of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. “Rich Silverstein was fundamental in turning our thinking around. As he looked at the problem, he came to the conclusion that if the strength is from the sites, then you have to build the identity from the sites up, not from a false overlay down.”

The first step was to come up with an overall term to convey the breadth of three legislatively designated national park sites, GGNRA, Muir Woods, Fort Point and their component sites. Although GGNRA remains the Congressionally-legislated name of the Park, Silverstein felt the name was vague, cumbersome and didn’t work for marketing purposes. So Golden Gate National Parks was adopted for the branding campaign to present to the public.



The Conservancy’s initial plan was to raise awareness through a poster campaign incorporating graphic designer Michael Schwab’s images. Schwab began by creating an overall brand look in a poster featuring the Golden Gate Bridge – the unifying physical and symbolic link of the northern and southern units of the Park. He then went on to create five additional posters of some of the Park’s most famous sites. Overall, eighteen site-specific images were created by Schwab.

“We had the best product in the world to work on. It’s not hard to have someone be inspired by seeing Alcatraz or Muir Woods,” said Rich Silverstein, member of the Conservancy’s marketing committee and Co-chairman and Creative Director of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, a renowned marketing firm that oversaw the development branding program. “The sites are illustrative, and I wanted each beautiful park (area within Golden Gate NRA) to be boiled down to its iconic self.”

Michael Schwab was able to do just that. He successfully created icons with a timeless American style, reminiscent of WPA artwork from the 1930s using strong images, bold

colors and typeface he custom-tailored. To achieve a timeless and strong graphic quality of the images, scenes depicting people or trendy recreational activities were avoided. “I want someone to be able to read my posters a block away. I find that paring away information is more dramatic than giving someone too much,” Schwab said. “When people have too many shapes, words and colors to look at, they look elsewhere.”

Production Partners:

The images were produced through a team effort involving the Park and the Conservancy including the pro bono marketing talents of Rich Silverstein of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners (Rich was serving on the Conservancy’s Board of Trustees), the design firm-Michael Schwab Studio in San Anselmo, California and B + R Screen Graphics as the printer.

Talent Recruited:

The Marketing Committee of the Conservancy’s Board of Trustees was charged with creating the identity program. The Committee included Gap CEO Mickey Drexler and advertising executive Rich Silverstein of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, creators of the award-winning campaign ads for the California Milk Advisory Board, Budweiser, Polaroid and Nike. The committee recognized that the Park had an identity problem and wanted to find a way to make people care about the Park. “People won’t give time or money to something they don’t understand,” Silverstein said.

The Conservancy and GGNRA recruited graphic designer Michael Schwab in 1996 to create a brand identity for the Park. Schwab, who previously created award-winning branding images for Levi’s, Coke, Apple and the U.S. Postal Service, was selected for his ability to simplify an idea and create bold, symbolic images. His work is known for its large, flat areas of color and dramatic perspectives.

“Most creative people in the commercial arts world are willing to donate their time and services to a good cause,” Schwab said. “In lieu of money, creative freedom is very valuable. So is the commitment to create a project with an aura of integrity and prestige.”

Moore attributes the branding success largely to Schwab’s graphic designs and a Board of Trustees that is passionate and committed to the Park. “We allow (the Board) to take their professional passion and utilize it in a public service capacity,” Moore said.

Moore feels it is important for nonprofits to show openness to what a professional can bring. “With that openness comes a little bit of willingness to let go,” he said. “Let everyone enjoy using their creative talents toward your cause. If you remain open, they may come up with something you may have never dreamed of, and that’s probably what makes it right for you.”

The synergy of Silverstein’s marketing and design sense and Schwab’s graphic creation skills resulted in a national prototype.

Production Process and Time Frame:

To create the park-identity posters, Michael Schwab often begins by studying each site from different locations and different angles, at different times of day and in different kinds of light. He then works from photographs to sketch his initial black and white designs, each representing an indelible memory of the location. He develops the final image by distilling the idea to its simplest, most essential form.

Schwab's images employ a distinctive typeface—a hand-drawn alphabet with sturdy all cap characters and unkered spacing. The strong graphic quality of the images reproduces equally well in full color and black and white, and can be adapted to everything from embroidered patches, mugs, magnets and outdoor signage to printed materials. Production timeframes vary: arriving at a single image for some sites is a relatively quick process. For others, like Crissy Field, the complexity of the site meant exploring numerous creative directions before arriving at the final product.

Image Roll Out/Display of Images:

The graphic images were an instant success when they were premiered for three months on donated San Francisco bus shelter poster space in 1997. The marketing space was donated by the Gap. San Franciscans loved the posters – so much so that some people stole the posters from the bus shelters. Next, several corporations purchased the large scale graphics as art for their offices. The Conservancy realized that they had a revenue-earning commodity in addition to park-identity marketing vehicle and started to envision a line of interpretive materials and business opportunities that could extend park awareness and generate income to assist the Park. A line of posters, T-shirts, mugs, hats and eventually calendars, magnets, bottled water and even chocolate tins followed in the Conservancy's outlets in the Park and outside.

How Was It Financed?

Because of the Park's location in one of the nation's largest metropolitan areas, the Conservancy was able to draw on highly qualified local talent who felt a personal commitment to helping the Park. Silverstein donated his time as creative director for the Parks' identity program. Schwab developed the initial poster images pro bono and subsequently at a significantly reduced fee. He donated his royalties to the Conservancy taking his pay in satisfaction, an expanded graphics reputation and increased business. Other leading firms and individuals contributed their expertise and services. The Gap donated funding for outdoor advertising.

Merchandising and Earned Income:

For years, the Conservancy has operated both retail and publishing programs to develop and sell park-related merchandise, maps and books at the Park's visitor centers. It now operates stores at San Francisco's Pier 39, Fisherman's Wharf and in eight park visitor centers, and has established a wholesale program to market interpretive materials to other retailers in the Bay Area and beyond. The Parks Conservancy's online store features many park-identity images and provides a vehicle for local, national, and international purchases.

The rollout of park-identity materials had an immediate and significant impact on retail sales. The Conservancy received a number of calls from people wanting to find out where they could purchase the posters. Schwab's images were reproduced on T-shirts, mugs, posters, calendars and cards. "When we opened a store in downtown San Francisco, people expressed excitement over having a place to get their hands on this merchandise," said Clover Earl, who oversees the Conservancy's retail program. "People understand the difference between high-quality and low-quality items. It's important to put your best foot forward to get people to take notice and have faith in who we are as an organization," said Earl.

Since the launch a decade ago, revenues from park-identity merchandise have continued to be strong, now averaging nearly 25% of all retail sales annually. The money has been directed toward special projects and programs for the GGNRA, including the restoration of Crissy Field, the construction of a new visitor center at Muir Woods, a shoreline accessible trail at Alcatraz, and programs for urban youth.

Public Reaction:

The success of the retail venture was obvious in the demand for the image-bearing merchandise that has generated millions of dollars in sales. People wearing, using and displaying the merchandise also become spokespersons for the Park. The branding program produced a boost in the Conservancy's membership. "Once people understand what it's about, they have shown overwhelming interest in becoming a member of the Conservancy," Earl said. "We signed up hundreds of people."