



Advertising Star

Sarah Biondi: Senior Account Executive at the McKee Wallwork Cleveland Ad Agency

By Douglas May

Sarah Biondi will test this summer for her third-degree black belt in the American style of Kenpo Karate. She has been studying and teaching kenpo for many years and says that she often feels as though she has just begun to scratch the surface. She adds that throughout her training she has been guided by some basic principles that she finds useful to develop better habits as an account supervisor.



Biondi says that she is starting to understand why a book like *The Art of War*, written a long time ago as a manual for battle, is now a popular business treatise. There are five key lessons she's taken from her martial arts background to apply to her work in advertising that she says give her a basis from which to work:

- Maintain a positive state of mind.** Sometimes you have to change a person's belief system. If you start out thinking that you can't do something, you probably won't be able to do it.
- Positioning is everything.** In martial arts, as in business, your positioning determines your success; your first move or strike sets up everything that comes after.
- Know your opponent.** Understanding various perspectives is undoubtedly one of the most important skills that an account person can have. An account person must be able to relate to an art director's take on a job, roll it together with the media planner's point of view, and then understand how a client will perceive it all. This skill seems so crucial, especially in an advertising landscape that is continually changing.
- Relax.** Staying relaxed is the best thing you can do — it helps you to stay focused and respond quickly. When we tense up, we tend to literally stop breathing and move like Frankenstein.
- Dig deep.** When someone is doing the same task over and over, they sometimes get bored and are not seeing potential for growth. By repeating an exercise over and over, however, we often end up learning some nugget of information that we hadn't considered before.

Biondi's unique approach to the world of advertising has brought her much success at McKee Wallwork Cleveland.

She maintains, "So, just as many young executives today turn to the concepts of old military strategy in business management, I try to utilize the lessons my sensei has taught me to stay on track and continue to improve my skills as an account supervisor."

Ad agency McKee Wallwork Cleveland specializes in providing advertising and marketing services for growing companies. The agency offers planning, creative ad development, and media services for companies such as the Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau, Heritage Hotels and Resorts, and Mr. Rooter. Its portfolio includes work in broadcast, print, and outdoor ads.

The award-winning agency has won nine American Advertising Federation awards for excellence in advertising. The firm won the awards, known as ADDYs, for work it performed for clients Taos Ski Valley, Tobacco Youth Prevention and Control, Ghost Town Trading Co., and Porsche of Albuquerque. Founded in 1997, the company has had a 72.2% growth rate, and its revenue for 2006 was \$12.4 million. The company has a smart branding capacity, and it's developed and trademarked a proprietary process, Charrette Planning, for developing brand strategies and marketing programs.

Q. What do you do for fun?
 A. I watch lots and lots of films; favorite filmmakers include Alejandro Inarritu, Ang Lee, and Pedro Almodovar. I also study kenpo and aikido. And being outdoors makes me very happy: skiing, hiking, swimming, etc.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?
 A. Cesaria Evora.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?
 A. *Vanity Fair*.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?
 A. I watch lots of PBS: *Frontline*, *Masterpiece Theatre*, *Now*, etc. I also enjoy the show *Life* starring Damian Lewis on NBC.

Q. Who is your role model?
 A. People who participate, speak their minds, and stay engaged in the world around them.



Advertising Star

Biondi has a BA in Radio and Television Production from The George Washington University. She started off working in video production in Washington, DC, for a few years as a coordinator and then as an assistant editor in New Mexico for a while. She says that eventually she worked for the New Mexico Film Commission before joining McKee Wallwork Cleveland.

Biondi remarks, "I am pretty new to the world of advertising, but I have always been interested in how advertising can shape our cultural landscape. I am fascinated when advertising goes beyond selling goods and services and has enough influence to steer the collective cultural voice. For example, you see a lot more racial diversity in television advertising today. The ethnicity has changed because those demographics have a great deal of buying power, but seeing that diversity on the television landscape will have a huge effect on the generation growing up now."

With the advent of the Internet and TiVo, Biondi sees advertising becoming more intermingled with entertainment and news channels. She thinks that it will be harder and harder to differentiate advertising in the future. She believes that film and television have a huge influence culturally on society and thinks that product placement can be a very powerful tactic.

"Just look at how *The Simpsons* or movies such as *Superbad* or *Napoleon Dynamite* have changed the lexicon of pop culture."

Biondi's clients are Mr. Rooter, Portland Glass, Center, Taos Ski Valley, and the Natural Stone Council. She explains that the Natural Stone Council is a group of associations that have come together to promote the use of genuine stone products over manufactured stone.

"Their efforts are similar to what the beef council did years ago to launch the 'what's for dinner' campaign. Our NSC campaign was aimed at the trade sector, the designers and architects that specify stone for a project. We learned

through our research that there were many misconceptions about genuine stones in the market, but ultimately people buy genuine stone products for emotional reasons. Our campaign tapped into the perception that having a unique piece of genuine stone installed in your house was like having a one-of-a-kind piece of art."

Center is a nonprofit that supports and provides opportunity for gifted photographers. It works hard to create fellowship among photographers and influential members of the photographic community. McKee Wallwork Cleveland took on Center as a pro bono client in 2006. It created a new identity package for Center and began to brand the organization. Center had been designing each piece of communication around various events, but McKee started to create each piece around Center, as the focal point for great photography.

Biondi adds, "The print ads we developed are some of my overall favorite pieces. The ads utilize stunning photography and incredibly resonating copy; they are very popular."

Biondi maintains that she's proudest of Center's new identity package and print campaign and Natural Stone Council's "As genuine as you" print ads.

What advice would Biondi give to people who are looking into advertising as a future career?

"If you are working in advertising, I think it's important to occasionally get out of your comfort zone and absorb new things. To paraphrase Mark Twain, you can't get a broad, wholesome view of the world by vegetation in your tiny corner. So every once in a while, force yourself to try a new cuisine; see a film you know nothing about; make conversation with a total stranger; chart a new path, even if it's just for a few hours, and see where you end up. So many of us watch the same TV programs, listen to the same Top 40 music, or surf the same websites. I am reminded of that famous quote by the writer Walter Lippmann, 'When everyone thinks alike, no one thinks very much.'"

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.