

1.2: Meet Our Agency Partner- SS+K

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. Characterize the Shepardson, Stern and Kaminsky (SS+K) organization, a creatively-driven strategic communications firm, and how it works to secure clients.

Get to know Shepardson, Stern and Kaminsky (SS+K) as it works on a campaign for msnbc.com, a media brand in search of an identity. SS+K opened its doors in 1993 and now has offices in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles. With over \$70 million in billings, SS+K is an independent agency owned by its partners, with a minority ownership by Creative Artists Agency (CAA)—perhaps the most powerful talent and literary agency in the world. CAA also owns the Intelligence Group, a market research and trend forecasting company.

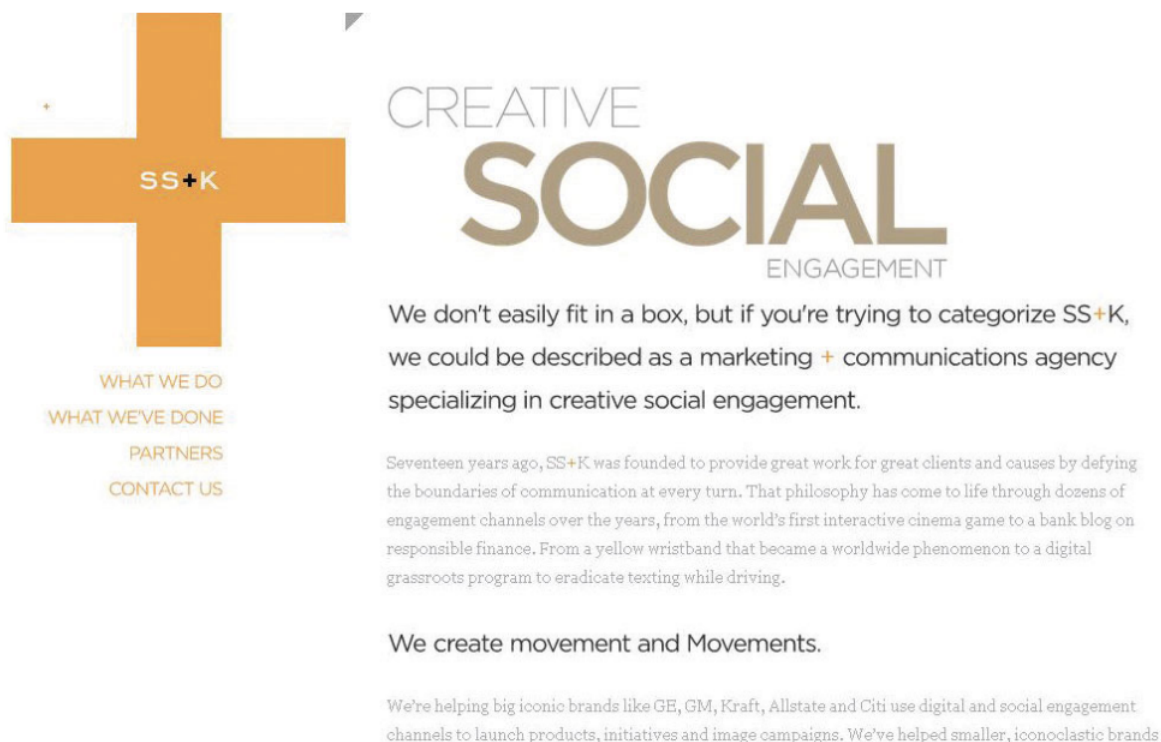


Figure 1.3 SS+K's Web site is an immersive introduction to the history and offerings of the agency. You can find it at ssk.com.

For this text, we interview the agency partners, the creative director, the account people, the creative team (copywriter and art director), the public relations experts, the account planners and research specialists, and the digital professionals who took the msnbc.com campaign from pitch to completion. And, a member of our author team knows this agency up close and personal: Amit Nizan was the account manager at SS+K who lived and breathed the msnbc.com campaign. A 2003 graduate of the renowned undergraduate advertising program at the University of Florida, Amit will help us take you through the planning and execution of this campaign as a young, dynamic advertising professional actually experienced it. Not too long ago she was a student just like you, so she feels your pain!

Through their words and documents you will follow, step by step, the thirteen-month process of bringing SS+K's campaign vision of "A Fuller Spectrum of News" to light. To allow us to bring you the inside story on how the agency created the msnbc.com campaign, msnbc.com and SS+K granted FWK full access to its creative work, internal processes, and employees. The result is a resource that offers new ways to teach and talk about the real world of advertising with course content that is affordable, accessible, timely, and relevant. Welcome to advertising education on steroids.

OK, So Who Is SS+K?

SS+K was founded in 1993 by three former political consultants—Rob Shephardson, Lenny Stern, and Mark Kaminsky—and a famous copywriter, David McCall. To this day, the agency is a mash-up of those roots in politics and creativity, bolstered by a dose of entertainment marketing via its partnership with CAA and the staff’s passion to learn and apply the latest technology. SS+K has become a haven for talented refugees from every corner of the communications world.

SS+K offers a full array of services to its clients, including advertising, marketing, design, public relations, public affairs, and research. Although many ad agencies, PR firms, and marketing consultancies endorsed integrated strategies over the last decade, SS+K believes that most agencies have built-in biases toward one type of solution. They tend to treat “integration” as an item on a check-off list. Ad agencies think in terms of ads. PR shops generate PR ideas. And so on...but not SS+K. For them, it is about delivering *the right message at the right time to the right audience with the right medium*. They call their approach to these types of media-neutral ideas **Asymmetric Communications**. Their perspective encourages the agency to “think outside the box” by employing a mix of traditional and new media (like urban games) to engage the audience in surprising ways and uncover opportunities to connect with them.



Figure 1.4 View of the Brooklyn Bridge from SS+K’s New York Office

This perspective is a consumer-centric approach the agency uses to find unique and surprising ways for clients to connect with and engage their target audiences. For example, instead of using traditional methods and messaging to increase awareness of Qwest Wireless among high school students, Qwest worked with SS+K to design an urban game called ConQwest that involved teams of students, newly created semacodes for use on cell phones, and giant inflatable game pieces. Semacode is a trade name for machine-readable two-dimensional black and white symbols that act as “barcode URLs.”

True to their political roots, the agency consulted with the Obama presidential campaign on driving more interest and participation among young voters. Since its inception, SS+K has maintained a high-profile nonprofit business, including work with UNICEF, Share Our Strength, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Lance Armstrong Foundation’s “**LIVESTRONG**” campaign.

The agency understands how to work with short lead times and mine for deep consumer insights that animate its work. It’s a combination that has made SS+K increasingly popular with a growing roster of clients, including Delta Airlines, Credo Mobile, Polo Ralph Lauren, AutoMart—and our client for this book, msnbc.com.

After fifteen years in business, all three founding partners—Rob Shephardson, Lenny Stern, and Mark Kaminsky—are still active in the firm, and they’ve added other key partners such as Executive Creative Director Marty Cooke to continue to provide fresh ideas and leadership.

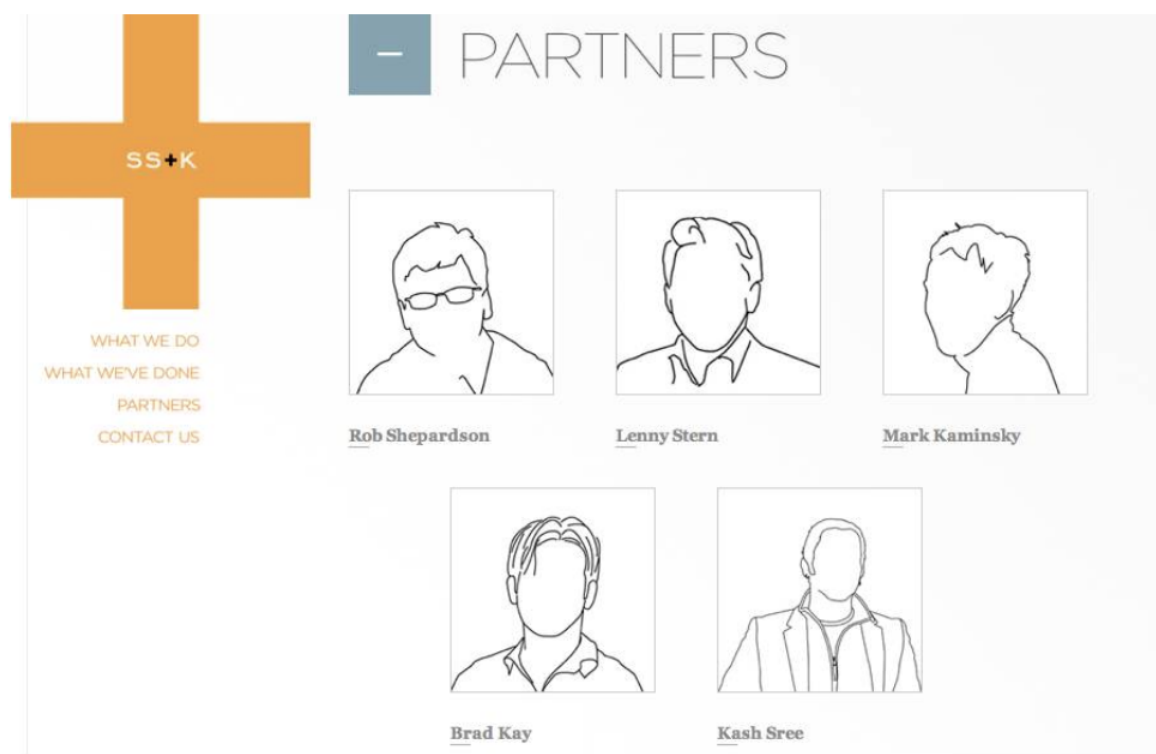


Figure 1.5 The Partners of SS+K

Our SS+K Odyssey

Here's how we got started: once SS+K agreed to participate in this unique partnership, it was time for us to become familiar with the campaign. First, our intrepid author Lisa Duke Cornell reaches out to Russell Stevens, a partner at SS+K.

From: Lisa Duke [mailto:lduke@jou.ufl.edu]
Sent: Thursday, June 28, 2007 2:15 PM
To: Russell Stevens
Subject: Upcoming interview

Dear Russell,

Greetings! I thought you might like a little background on me before we meet for your interview July 9/10. Before becoming an academic, I worked in advertising and still find the business fascinating. You can find me at

<http://www.jou.ufl.edu/faculty/facultydetail.asp?id=lduke>. I look forward to talking with you about your career and your contributions to the [msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com) campaign. Our interview will be videotaped and edited for use with a college advertising textbook. James Guardino is the director/producer who will be in charge of the taping. You may remember him from some work he did for SS+K that can be found here: <http://arguspictures.com/reel.html>.

You don't need to prepare for our interview. Our talk will be informal and I won't ask anything you need to look up or think too hard about. This should be an enjoyable experience, not a challenging one. To maximize your ease and add interest for the students, we would like to record the interview in your office.

Can't wait to return to NY and immerse myself in the SS+K culture. If I can answer any questions before we meet, please let me know.

Best regards,

Lisa Duke Cornell, Ph.D.
Advertising Department
University of Florida

Figure 1.6 Follow the e-mail trail.

Dr. Duke Cornell flew up from Gainesville (where she teaches advertising at the University of Florida) and came in to meet the whole SS+K crew, teach them a little about [Unnamed Publisher](#), and learn a lot about SS+K. Throughout the text, you will find links to the interviews Dr. Duke Cornell conducted with the team based in New York. In addition, she interviewed key team members from the Los Angeles and Boston offices.

Amit Nizan joined the author team in the spring of 2008. Drawing on personal knowledge of the agency and the [msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com) account, Ms. Nizan immersed herself in the interviews and information the team provided to Dr. Duke Cornell.

Launch! unfolds chapter by chapter across a timeline for [msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com)'s first branding campaign. Before we get into that, let's meet the full cast of characters who worked on the [msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com) account with Ms. Nizan.

NEW YORK	LOS ANGELES	BOSTON
Marty Cooke Chief Creative Officer Partner	Joe Kessler Partner	Russell Stevens Partner
Matt Ferrin Creative	Ronit Mevorach Marketing	
Sam Mazur Creative	Melinda Moore Marketing	
Amit Nizan Advertising		
Katie O'Kane Public Relations		
John Richardson Asymmetric Intelligence Unit		
Michelle Rowley Asymmetric Intelligence Unit		
Danielle Tracy Public Relations		

Figure 1.7 Meet the core SS+K Team assigned to the msnbc.com account.

Additional SS+K employees worked on aspects of the msnbc.com account, including Jeannie O'Toole (Head of Print Production), John Kirkwood (Web and Video Production), Tim Player (Studio Manager), Kelly Kraft (Project Manager), Amy Gaiser (PR), Janetti Chon (PR), Aaron Taylor-Waldman (Studio Designer), Alice Ann Wilson (Head of Design), Natalie Cho (Designer), Sonya Fridman (Designer), Joe Sayaman (Copywriter), and Rochelle Ardesher (Project Manager).

As you can see, it takes a village to work on an account. Each of the people beyond the core team contributed their respective expertise to the production and execution of the first-ever msnbc.com branding campaign.

How SS+K Works

How is an ad agency *not* an ad agency? SS+K does not consider itself an advertising agency, but instead a creatively-driven strategic communications firm that solves problems through a variety of innovative techniques—including but not limited to traditional advertising approaches. You're going to see throughout this book that SS+K is not alone in this regard—the advertising industry seems to change its stripes almost daily as new technologies and trends evolve!

As a remnant from SS+K's founders' days as political consultants the agency uses an **integrated model**. SS+K is **media-agnostic**; this means it doesn't care what medium or discipline it uses to solve a client's problem as long as the solution delivers the right message at the right time to the right audience with the right medium.

Video Spotlight - What is Integrated Marketing?



key takeaway

Welcome to a new model of textbook learning. This book is different from others in two really important ways:

- It's the first open source, professionally authored advertising/marketing textbook *ever*.
- It's the first advertising textbook written in partnership with a real-life advertising agency.

The SS+K agency is going to help us learn how to do advertising by actually doing advertising. Follow along with us as we chronicle its efforts to win the important msnbc.com account and then deliver on its strategy to make this media brand the source of news for the customers the site hopes to reach.

exercises

- List four facts that characterize the Shepardson, Stern and Kaminsky (SS+K) communications organization. Be specific.
- SS+K uses a distinctive trademarked approach for engaging clients and audiences in the advertising and communication process. Briefly describe SS+K's asymmetric approach to formulating communications and ideas.
- Discuss the integrated model of communication presented in this chapter section. Why does SS+K describe itself as being “media-agnostic” in its approach to communication?

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