Weinberg talked to for NAIL, Lizzi Weinberg has worked on campaigns that have earned prominent advertising awards. As head of production for the Providence, Rhode Island, agency, says their favorite clients hire them to be “consultative.” To highlight the durability of Lenox Blades in the toolmaker’s catalogues and print ads, photographer Mark Tule made close-ups of saw blades after they’ve been put to use. Lizzi Weinberg, head of production for the Providence, Rhode Island, agency, says their favorite clients hire them to be “consultative.”

Creating Spotlight

TOUGH AS NAIL

THE ADVERTISING AGENCY NAIL in Providence, Rhode Island, founded in 1998, has been recognized for innovative branding work for both regional and national clients. As head of production for NAIL, Lizzi Weinberg has worked on campaigns that have earned prominent advertising awards. Weinberg talked to PDN about what the branding firm looks inside the photographers it hires.

PDN: NAIL has done web design, print ads, TV spots. Can you discuss some occasions when you thought print was the right medium for the brand or the message?

LW: In the campaign for Floating Hospital for Children, print was helpful. There are a ton of hospitals in New England, and you’re conditioned to think all hospital ads look alike. There’s a smiling doctor looking at a chart. In working with [photographer] Jesse Burke, we wanted to use traditional media but turn it on its head, and appear in traditional media with atypical photography. We did some of our best photography for Lenox Blades. They don’t make saws, they make the saw blades. They're a little more expensive, and they really last. Our advertising was head-to-head, our blade vs. theirs. In their ad and catalogue, they were reaching out to contractors and guys who got their hands dirty all the time, showing them pristine white blades that will only look like that for one second. As soon as you cut through your first piece of wood, the blade no longer looks like that. We said: What if we showed used Blades—what the blades look like to the people who use them again and again? It tells the story of their longevity.

We worked with Mark Tule, a photographer out of San Diego. We found him because we had worked with his rep [JK&]. It’s easier for us to find photographers through reps, because we can see a variety or work, or tell them what we need and they’ll pitch us [photographers]. Mark does macro photography, taking 50 photos of a product from different angles, and in post, he blends the images to show all the details. It was a ballet of techniques that was interesting to watch. The images of used blades were on the headlines and spread in the catalogue. The client agreed to it, and it was very successful.

PDN: NAIL describes its work as creating “emotional” messages. How does emotion come into play when conceiving branding?

LW: We’re human beings, and driven by emotions. Emotional storytelling is your most successful lever to pull to motivate humans. Also, now people can opt out of advertising so easily: to remain on people’s radar, they have to invite you. We used to think that if you just shouted louder, it would work, but that’s changed. It’s less product-oriented than ever, more about emotional storytelling, though that’s always been NAIL’s approach, because I think that’s what we enjoy. It gets people here excited about their jobs.

PDN: Are photography or video useful for emotional storytelling?

LW: When you’re looking at pictures or seeing a movie, you’re getting more cues and more information than just the words on the page. I think that visuals draw people in quickly, and you’re giving people a big story in a short amount of time.

LW: Creative directors at NAIL chose Jesse Burke to shoot the Floating Hospital for Children campaign after they saw photos in his book, Wild & Precious, about his travels with his daughter, Says Weinberg: “We knew that if we hired [Jesse], he would help us achieve what we hoped for.” PDN: What kind of clients does NAIL work with, and what do they expect from NAIL? LW: Since our inception in 1998, NAIL has had a variety of clients on our roster—from Mike and Ike to Stonyfield Farms to HealthSource RI to New Balance. That’s purposeful. We want to remain curious and fresh in the communications we create for our clients. We like to be involved in the big picture, so we love when clients come to us and say, “We want to launch a new product,” or “We want to appeal to this audience, and here’s the budget for the year.” Then we get to say, “What do you stand for? What does this particular audience want to know about you?” and “How should we reach them—with what materials and in what media?” We like to be consultative.

PDN: What are some other collaborations you’ve had with photographers?

LW: We never want to be surprised at the end of a shoot but we like to be deliberate. If the photographer gives us exactly what we asked for, it’s a letdown. Why did we go to the trouble of hiring an expert if they didn’t take you someplace new? We know that if we hired [Jesse], he would help us achieve what we hoped for and not let the idea get bogged down by client talks. And the client liked the vision, they trusted him and they trusted us. That was pretty exciting.

Jesse’s style—being journalistic and finding what he wants in the moment—really helped in shooting children. We were glad Jesse’s a father. He knew how to connect with some of the kids. This is one of those cases where we had the budget for the whole year of advertising. In fleshing out our ideas, we had written video scripts, to be read by the kids. We thought How much would it cost to bring in a video shooter, video shoot at the same time [as the stills] and edit it in house? Jesse had made a video for his book that was gorgeous, and he connected us with his cinematographer and brought her along to shoot video.

PDN: What are some other collaborations you’ve had with photographers?

LW: Gary Land does a lot of sports in motion, and has a stylistic polish to his work. We hired him to work on Vibram FiveFingers shoes. Barefoot running is beautiful, but kind of haunting, too. In his book, Gary Land does a lot of sports in motion, and has a stylistic polish to his work. We hired him to work on Vibram FiveFingers shoes. Barefoot running is beautiful, but kind of haunting, too.
was big, and we pitched them on the tagline, “You are the technology.” We did a website and later print ads with naked runners, explaining that you were designed to run, and the only thing the Vibram shoe is doing is protecting your feet. Nakedness had to be part of it, but it couldn’t be seedy or distracting. Gary was great. We’ve since used him for a New Balance shoe campaign.

For Topo athletic shoes, created by the guys who started Vibram, John Huet shot multiple exposures of athletes who use the shoes.

**PDN:** Besides great imagery, what qualities are you looking for in the photographers you hire?

**LW:** We look for a style and something that stands out. It makes us a little nervous when photographers say, “I can do everything.” We’d rather somebody say, “This is my passion and what I do well.”

Having a great producer is very important. We like when the photographer is acutely focused on the creative, and they have someone else dealing with the other components. When they are trying to do it on their own it gets sloppy and messy, and we nervously ask, “Now, where are the bathrooms? How will we get power?” Jesse Burke has a producer, Kate Geskos, he works with regularly. She was great at the casting and locations.

We look for someone who understands the client experience, and can distinguish what we’re asking for from what the client insists on. The client wants to feel like the photographer is listening. Any photographer who hides behind the camera too much isn’t great.

It would be great if reps were less quick to say, “Yes, yes, we can do that.” We like someone who is pushing back, asking: “Why are you doing that?”

**PDN:** Are there things you wish photographers understood better about advertising now, or what you need or what clients need?

**LW:** We tend to align ourselves with the photographer. We’re always trying to get the client out of their comfort zone. We’re trying to make art and we want the photographer’s help keeping us there. We’re hiring you for your artful approach, and we’ll tell you: We have to do this because the client wants it. We want photographers who don’t think that because it’s work for a client, it has to look like a Pottery Barn catalogue.

**PDN:** Where do you find photographers?

**LW:** Through reps. Sometimes we’ll see nice work other agencies are doing and we’ll look for that person, and also see who else their rep works with. I think photographers should work on getting their credit in the advertising trades. Truth be told, printed mailers go right in the recycling bin. We don’t give them more weight than a cool Instagram shot. Email me once or twice a year, not every month, because if we like you, we’ll bookmark you, and call you when we have the right job.

**PDN:** You’ve been at NAIL for nine years. What are some of the changes you’ve seen?

**LW:** We’ve stayed true to the kind of work we like to do, and that has gotten us attention from bigger clients who have more needs and are more interested in consultative relationships. The needs of our clients have dictated growth. Nine years ago we didn’t do social media. For about five minutes, social media was its own department. Now it’s just folded in with other content. Now clients need more content than ever. But they don’t have the mechanism for tracking when the usage is up. Clients need video for a one-year campaign, and it’s still up on YouTube for longer. They need products shot in Q1 and Q2, but they need assets for Instagram and other uses. I don’t have the answer for that.

Photographers need to understand that the client’s advertising isn’t being resourced [funded] better just because they have more places to use your photos. *pdn*