wrap it up

Huntsman Architectural Group rewards the staff of RedEnvelope, Inc. by transforming its San Francisco headquarters into a gift of a space

By Amy Milshtein
Photography by David Wakely

What do the physical surroundings of a chic cyberspace company look like? Probably less chic than you'd imagine—unless that company is RedEnvelope, Inc., which recently got a new home. Designed by Huntsman Architectural Group, the San Francisco headquarters opens up like a present, and it works like a dream.

Launched in 1999, RedEnvelope offers upscale seasonal and custom gifts through its catalogs and website. The company, which last quarter reported total net revenues of $53 million, takes its name from the Asian custom of giving monetary gifts in small red envelopes. Its old space was, in the words of RedEnvelope chief council Chris Nordquist, "too small and too crummy."

When the hangar doors are down (above) the "Dragon Room" looks like a gift waiting to be opened. Surprise! When the doors are lifted (right) the red-hued room comes into view.
Recycled fish netting (above) works as curtains to separate the employee lounge from the rest of the ground floor. The company’s signature red is maintained throughout spaces including the secondary reception (right), with seating and lighting that lends a welcoming feel.

Because of its racetrack design, with private offices on the window wall and small open-plan areas in the middle, the previous office proved threadbare, dark, and non-conducive to collaborative work. With the company shifting its focus over the past three years from buying to designing products—now designing about half of the offerings—a bright, productive environment was needed.

A circa 1990 mid-rise building, newly adapted with seismic braces, fits the bill. Although RedEnvelope is and will strictly remain a catalog/web company, Huntsman AG strove to create an attractive public face along with extremely functional and comfortable private work areas. “The building has a large, storefront presence on a busy street,” says Mark Harbick, design principal at Huntsman AG. “We wanted to capitalize on that.”
To bring RedEnvelope to physical life, the designers took the concept of receiving and opening a gift and translated it into tangible space. To that end, the ground floor reception/boardroom features custom, translucent hanger doors. When down, the doors present a formal face, much like the outside of a gift box. Opening dramatically by folding into overhead canopies, the doors reveal an exciting red-walled space named the "Dragon Room."

Even the idea of tissue paper is represented in the form of netted curtains. Visually separating the employee lounge, the curtains were far from budget busters. "They are actually used fishing nets that we bought for five dollars a pound," says Huntsman designer David Meckley. "They start out white and the ocean eventually dies them that wonderful color." (And no, they don't smell remotely fishy.)

The judicious use of red downstairs pulls the eye through the long space. Upstairs, bold color is used even more sparingly. "It would have been easy to go overboard on the red," reports Harbick. "Instead, it appears as little saturated moments." That doesn't mean, however, that the upstairs is devoid of pigmentation. Instead Huntsman, along with colorist Jill Pilaroscia from Colour Studio, created a "full spectrum environment," according to Pilaroscia, "where anyone can feel comfortable and find a haven."

Upstairs (right and below) the designers turned a garish, unorganized space into a calm yet colorful work environment
This sprucing up was a far cry from the existing interior. Sold to RedEnvelope as a turnkey space, the upper floors were a dot-com leftover. Garishly colored, completely disorganized, and burdened with an HVAC system so noisy that people couldn't here themselves on the telephone, the upstairs demanded an immediate reallocation of budget money. Gently colored walls that play off the classic brick along with a ceiling painted robin's egg blue bringing calm and reason to the space.

The designers kept most of the carpet in place, adding bands of colored carpet tile to create circulation pathways and break up clusters of workstations. While much collaboration goes on informally in these open spaces, the office offers a variety of conference rooms for more formal presentations. Each of these features a different color and is named after a Chinese astrological sign. “Rooms with the least access to natural light were done in hues that suggest warmth and light to compensate,” says Pilaroscia.

Everyone’s favorite conference room turns out to be the one that the designers had to fight the hardest to create: the lavender room. “Purple is having a big moment now,” says Pilaroscia. “They needed a current, fashion color.”

“It just shows,” adds Meckley, “that purple can be corporate.” And that color can work. To Nordquist’s satisfaction employees were thrilled with their new offices, “Those first moments were like Christmas morning,” he reports. “Then after some oohing and ahhing everyone just went right to work.”

who


what


where

Location: San Francisco, CA. Total floor area: 10,000 sq. ft. No. of floors: 3. Average floor size: 10,608 sq. ft. Total staff size: 150.