

MEDIA

With Literary Support, Xerox Asserts Its Modern Relevance

Advertising

By MATT KRUPNICK OCT. 22, 2017

A 111-year-old company has turned to a 5,000-year-old medium to assert its relevance in an ever-changing workplace culture.

Xerox and the 92nd Street Y in New York have gathered a few boldface creative names for a book showcasing the tech company's tools and the Y's cultural cachet. The anthology, "Speaking of Work: A Story of Love, Suspense and Paperclips," is being released Monday and can be downloaded free.

Featuring 12 essays, short stories and even a song, the book includes new work by writers including Joyce Carol Oates, Gary Shteyngart and Lee Child; the poet Billy Collins; and the musicians Aimee Mann and Jonathan Coulton. Each of the works focuses on the workplace.

The book is part of Xerox's "Set the Page Free" project, which benefits the 92nd Street Y and Worldreader, a nonprofit that promotes global literacy. The company's name appears in only a couple of works in the book, but some writers used Xerox equipment as they worked.

Xerox spent decades as the Google of its generation (“I’m going to go Xerox this document”). A Xerox copier was ubiquitous in office settings.

“They had a cultural footprint as a brand that was pretty big and vivid,” said Kevin O’Neill, an advertising professor at Syracuse University.

But the company has had to reinvent itself as other tech companies have caught up. Xerox was looking for a way to reinforce its longtime role as an essential part of office life while producing something culturally significant.

The book, which will also be handed out in printed form to customers and clients, was the perfect tool for bridging the goals, said Toni Clayton-Hine, the company’s chief marketing officer.

“It was a logical connection to what you knew of Xerox so far,” she said. The company still provides copiers, printers and scanners, but it has branched out into cloud computing and translation software as well. “We wanted to show how Xerox is relevant to the workplace today.”

Xerox gave the writers little guidance, Ms. Clayton-Hine said.

“We took a leap of faith,” she said. “In many respects, we weren’t sure what we were going to get. What we got back was really fantastic.”

The works include the humorous (Mr. Shteyngart recalls his first job, advertising piano lessons on a sandwich board in Union Square, surrounded by drug dealers) and the musical (Ms. Mann and Mr. Coulton muse on working from home: “Tried to Skype with the background clutter / Printer, mug and comb”).

In his poem, Mr. Collins, a former national poet laureate, remembers his father’s downtown Manhattan office, calling it “an Avalon of supplies” with an “oasis of the water cooler.”

The 92nd Street Y, which hosts speakers, concerts and other events on the Upper East Side, recruited the artists. The writing was shepherded by Bernard Schwartz, director of the Y’s Unterberg Poetry Center.

“There is a unique thrill to coming to work and having in one’s inbox new work from artists such as these,” Mr. Schwartz said.

Corporations have long sponsored cultural institutions and events, but the Xerox project continues a more recent trend toward commissioning art.

In 2014, the fast-food chain Chipotle announced that top writers, including Toni Morrison and George Saunders, would produce work for its cups and bags. That project was produced by the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, whose work also appears in the Xerox book.

Classic literature has occasionally provided marketing opportunities as well. A 2012 Audi commercial, for example, adopted a “Moby Dick” theme to appeal to literary types.

Leaning on literature as a marketing tool shows that companies are eager to attract “the influentials,” Mr. O’Neill said. Commissioning works of art is far more significant than simply slapping a corporate name on someone else’s event, he said.

“A key thing with managing a corporate reputation is not what you say, but what you do,” said Mr. O’Neill, whose fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*. “I’m always much more impressed when I see a corporation doing something like this.”

Nostalgia was one of the reasons Mr. Shteyngart was drawn to the project.

“I always loved office equipment, even though I could never get it to work right,” said Mr. Shteyngart, who used a voice-activated Xerox printer while writing his essay. But, he added, the Y’s involvement in the anthology was crucial to his participation.

“I probably would have been a little more skeptical if it had been the corporation that approached me rather than the Y,” he said.

The corporate ties didn’t bother Ms. Oates, who said she viewed the book as just another anthology.

“I like to write,” said Ms. Oates, a Princeton University professor, whose short story explores an awkward relationship between teacher and student. “The opportunity to write about work was inviting.”

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