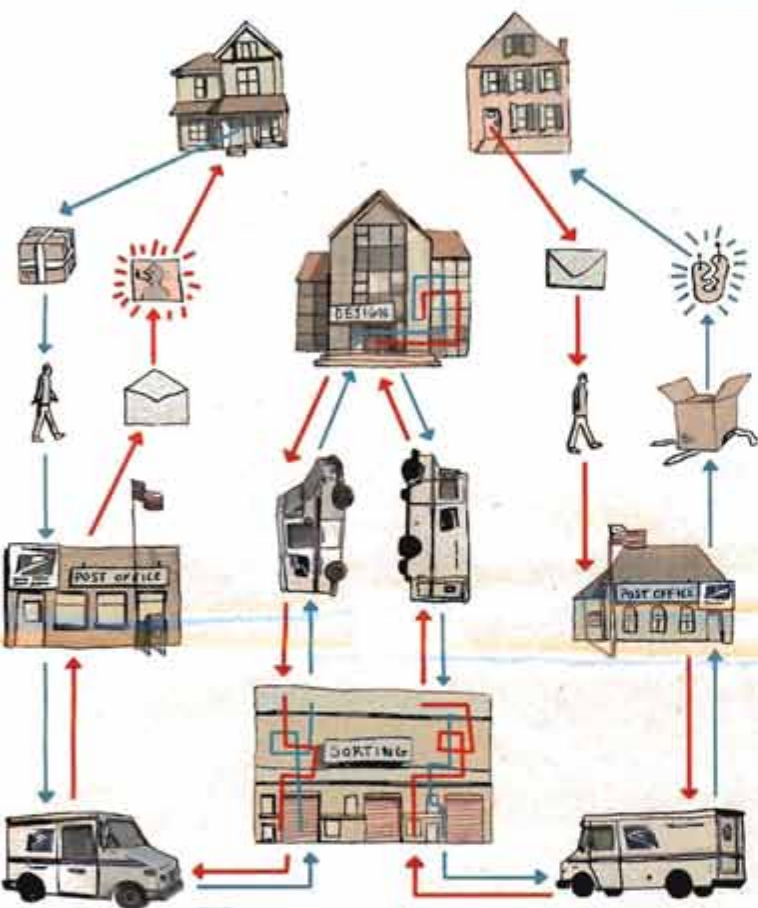


# Trading Partners

How one online cool-stuff experiment evolved from promotion to swapping to ... selling.



## Swap Meat

Creative people want to express that creativity. Meanwhile, they need to make a living — possibly by finding an audience for some buyable form of that creativity. This is an old predicament, but the Internet enables new experiments in resolving it — like the Swap Meat, a project of a Web site called Coudal.com. Coudal Partners is a small firm based in Chicago that does branding and design work for clients and has also created products of its own. Coudal.com is certainly a promotional tool for the firm, but just as certainly a constantly updated trove of interesting links and cleverly entertaining goof-off projects. Which is more or less how the Swap Meat started.

The site often gets 20,000 visitors a day, according to Jim Coudal, the founder, but what's important is who those visitors are: designers, art directors and so on. "People who read our site are people like us," says Coudal, who has five employees and one intern. Many of the visitors, he continues, are also like Coudal in that they are "doing this design-entrepreneurship thing," balancing their own projects with client work. Many send samples of their personal work

to Coudal. Mostly, he says, they just want to "share" what they have made. But, of course, they hope Coudal will not only like what they have done but also "share" the news with the site's readers — to "link it up," as he puts it.

A few months ago, Coudal Partners decided that it would come right out and ask for cool things, with the thought of highlighting the best of them on its site under the Swap Meat rubric, rewarding participants by sending them one another's stuff. Items rolled in, and Coudal posted blurbs, links and pictures of the most interesting ones: Gibson Holub's photo journal, "30 Days in Red Pants"; pastries from ShoeBox Oven, a specialty bakery; Lil Discs, "limited edition three-inch CDs of experimental music in handmade packaging"; and so on.

"It didn't take long for us to realize that this was the worst business idea we'd ever had," Coudal says, since time and postage costs would only increase as more people participated. So the trade-cool-stuff project took on a new, revenue-generating dimension. Rod Hunting, who works for a Chicago package-design company, had submitted an example of a poster he made from his line drawings of vintage cameras. Coudal called Hunting and asked if he would be willing to print 100 of them, to be sold exclusively through the Swap Meat for \$35 each. (Coudal splits proceeds evenly with the creator.) These sold out, Hunting's own site saw a traffic spike and a publication called File Magazine contacted him about publishing a series of Polaroids he had highlighted there. "I wasn't really expecting any of that to happen," Hunting says. "It was huge." He is now selling a second set of prints, of stereo-equipment drawings.

Coudal has since selected a few other submissions (T-shirts, stickers, prints) as Swap Exclusives, sold in limited batches on the site, and has extended what was first expected to be a short experiment to last through the summer. More recently, he solicited a Swap Meat product, an edition of sketchbooks by Kevin Cornell, an illustrator and cartoonist, which promptly sold out. Some items Coudal isn't selling on its own site have benefited just from the attention: Kate Lane, a New York illustrator and designer, says she sold several hundred of her pro-evolution "I Believe in Science" T-shirts after Coudal featured one.

While Swap Meat ignores mass-produced items or other blatantly promotional submissions, what all these creative products have in common is that on some level, each was submitted to draw attention to the creator. And Coudal's role in publicizing them draws attention to its site, and thus the firm. In a way, it's a virtuous circle of artful swag. It could also be viewed as self-promotion posing as self-expression, but so could a lot of dinner-party conversations. And, of course, there is no guarantee that the market will reward creativity. Megan Vandehey delivered a handmade piece of jewelry to the Coudal offices in person, and while she was excited to see it featured on the site, she received little feedback and no offers. "I guess I'm O.K. with that," she says. "I like what I made, and it really made me happy while I was creating it." ■