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SILICON VALLEY POSTCARD

A NEW KIND OF AD SPACE

BY RODES FISHBURNE

Paul and Larry were looking for a clean surface to throw some light on. Larry was riding shotgun, navigating, because he had some specific ideas about where they could go in San Francisco to spread the word. He called it "making a good impression."

They pulled over on Lombard Street. "That's a beaut," Larry said. The "beaut" was a three-story apartment building with a nice, windowless back wall. The customers at Mel's Drive-In, tucking into cheeseburgers and malts, would see the message. So would drivers coming into the city from Marin County, especially if they craned their necks when they stopped at the red light.

While waiting for night to fall, Paul cranked up a fifty-five-amp generator and arranged a Pani projector in the back of the rented Ryder truck. He works for Staging Techniques of North Hollywood, a company that does lighting for special events. But lately he's been sent north to San Francisco to project giant advertisements onto the sides of buildings. Clients up here want something different, something that stops traffic. In a city where new dot-coms jam the airwaves with advertising, Paul and Larry are pioneering a new medium.

Their client this evening, like every Internet company, desperately needs advertising. The more people who know you exist, the more "eyeballs" you will get on your Web site. The eyeballs are what keep the whole dot-com train lurching forward.

Larry and Paul decided that it was show time-except for one little problem. The people at

the advertising firm had sent slides that were a quarter inch too wide to fit in the projector. Paul improvised by taping the slide over the metal holder and flashed it onto the side of the building:

But the name of the client-Datek, an on-line brokerage firm that launched in July, 1996-didn't appear at the bottom, because the metal slide holder was too small.

"I wish they'd sent better slides," Paul muttered, frustrated.

"Yeah, but that is an outstanding impression," Larry said encouragingly. "I mean, that's what advertising is, right?"

The fellows let the phrase flutter in the projector for a few minutes. A man passed by on the sidewalk, his head down. To try to make the message fit, Paul jammed the slide into the holder, despite the extra quarter inch. On Lombard Street the cars stopped at the red light. The full moon flashed through a hole in the fog. Paul and Larry peered up at the new message:

The phrase gleamed in huge white letters against the side of the building.

"That looks pretty good," Larry said. Then he leaned over toward Paul and whispered, "What does Datek do?"