

Creative designers got lesson in client selection

By Val Previsch

Enquirer contributor

DEERFIELD TOWNSHIP –

Adaptation is an important skill in any business, but in the world of branding and advertising, it can be critical as clients come and go, and market demands change quickly.

Greg Fehrenbach and Joel Warneke of Rocket Science + Design re-discovered their adaptation skills over the past 12 months and now are coming out on top.

After losing a major client a year ago, Rocket Science faced up to the fact that it had too much riding on one account, says Fehrenbach, who founded the agency in 1999 with friend and colleague Warneke.

The two met while working on product design at Huffly Bicycle in the 1990s. As Huffly began to downsize, the pair decided to start their own firm specializing in brand strategy, marketing communications, and package and product design.

In the early years, Huffly was a major client, Warneke says. About five years ago, however, Huffly cut back its work with Rocket Science just as a new, large health-care client walked through the door, the partners say. Unfortunately, their business with the health-care company, which they prefer to keep anonymous, ended last year.

During the first few months of 2010 the firm was forced to begin shedding employees as projects for the health-care client began to wind down. The customer was changing its design agency at the direction of a corporate parent, and nothing could be done to salvage the situation.

“This was as big a challenge as we’ve faced,” Fehrenbach says. “We’re always battling to diversify as a small agency. It’s easy to have your eggs in one basket. This was most definitely a test of who we are, what kind of resiliency does the agency have.”

Going from about a dozen employees down to five within a year was a big blow. So was losing 20 percent of the company’s revenue, the details of which the owners decline to disclose.

But Fehrenbach and Warneke didn’t waste time worrying. Instead, they hired a business development director, Chuck Tabri. Then they aggressively pursued new clients who would fit with the company’s core strengths, including health care and sports and recreation.



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Joel Warneke (right) and Greg Fehrenbach are rebuilding their company after losing a major “eggs in one basket” client. Now, instead of letting a client pick their firm, they pursue those with the best fit.

About Rocket Science + Design

■ Owners: Greg Fehrenbach and Joel Warneke

■ Address: 5939 Deerfield Blvd., Studio 201, Deerfield Township 45040

■ Phone: 513-398-1700

■ Website: www.rocket201.com

■ Employees: Five

■ Founded: 1999

■ Notable: Rocket Science received a national ADDY Award from the American Advertising Federation last year for the firm’s own redesigned stationery.

Now, clients include Luxottica, Cintas, Valvoline and the Cincinnati Cyclones, Warneke says.

“In the past we’ve let the clients come to us, and we’ve worked around their needs,” Fehrenbach says. “Now we want to pick the clients we want to work for. Number one is we want to be true to ourselves.”

“Our ideal clients have sophisticated marketing and products that need to be sold in the consumer marketplace. Although we can certainly do business to business, our passions lie in consumer product categories.”

Rocket Science also has opened a second office in Chicago, a city where the company already serves at least two clients.

The partners say that while the

bigger picture of staying on top of business development is critical, they still most enjoy working hands-on with projects day-to-day.

“Our passion is creative thinking and conceptual design – where can we take the brand,” Warneke says. “We want to do more of that.”

Paul Tate, creative arts pastor at Horizon Community Church in Newtown, hired Rocket Science to help the church develop an updated brand and new print material to go with it.

“I am a former designer myself,” Tate says. “I know that some of them can be prima donnas with an arrogant attitude.”

“One of the things that struck me right away about Rocket Science is how very down-to-earth, upbeat and friendly they were,” he says. “Their combination of people skills and excellent design skills have made them a pleasure to work with.”

Scott Collins, president and CEO of SRA (Senior Resource Alliance) in Mason, which helps care for aging adults and their families, is impressed with the pair’s hard-working approach.

“They spent a year getting to know us and our customers,” Collins says. “This was all before we even signed a contract. The fact that they were willing to spend that kind of time spoke volumes to us.”

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