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INSIDE TRACK

Bascom Is Charting Courses

Daniel Schoonmaker
Published: October 2, 2006

HOLLAND — Velocity Partners founder Brian Bascom likes to use sailing as an analogy for his business.

"When you're sailing, there aren't many things under your control," he explained. "You have no control over the waves; you can't control the wind or the weather, or your competition. The only thing you've got under your control is the boat."

As such, a sailor needs to have a well-tuned boat, the right gear and sails, a strong team and a smart course. When the wind changes, the team needs to be prepared to tack and jibe along with it.

"Business is much the same way," Bascom said. "You have no control over the economic climate, over interest rates, your competitors — a lot of key aspects of the business. The company of the future needs to have a good solid boat, gear and team, be constantly watching for wind shifts, and have a plan and strategy to get there."

As a sailor, Bascom fielded the winning team for the Sailing World Lands End Detroit NOOD Regatta in 2003 and 2004. Through his three-employee market research and strategy firm, he has helped chart the course for companies such as Herman Miller, Steelcase, VeriSign, Miller Brewing Co. and a vast array of other companies large and small.

"Companies call us when they're interested in growth or increasing the value of their organization," Bascom said. "They're looking at new products or service industries, or they want to get into a new market."

In a recent case, the Holland-based firm was tapped by an office furniture maker looking to introduce a series of construction integrated products, but was unsure of what market sector in which to launch the platform. Velocity managed a research campaign involving hundreds of facilities managers and developers, then laid out what it believed to be the proper strategy to bring the product to market.

For another client, the firm introduced a struggling furniture line to leading architecture and design firms, a campaign that allowed the client's penetration into new markets.

"We make sure that they are properly targeted and focused on the most



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/MICHAEL BUCK

Clients hope for smooth sailing when using Brian Bascom's market research and strategy firm.

profitable customer bases," Bascom said. "We help the dollars they are investing in sales and marketing be more effective."

A Muskegon native, Bascom was first introduced to these concepts as a consultant for Whittman-Hart in West Michigan, working with sales-force issues and customer relationship management. On the eve of the Chicago-based consulting firm's ill-fated acquisition of US Web/CKS at the height of the dot-com boom, Bascom was yearning for ways to bring more value to the companies with which he worked. He was tired of focusing on the billable hour, and the merger offered an opportunity to have the freedom and creativity he desired.

In 2000, he founded Velocity Partners.

With the shuttering of the local Kennedy Research branch, there was no true market research firm in West Michigan. If a firm wanted to undertake a sophisticated research campaign, it looked to Chicago or Detroit, where large firms populated by mathematical Ph.D.s still exist.

To some degree, Velocity fills that void. Through its partners, the company can deliver lengthy and sophisticated research products, but its service does not end there.

"We help them execute that information," Bascom said. "Companies are going to ask questions. They want to know what the customers want and what their competitors are doing, or what a market segment looks like and how they can fit into it, and we're there to answer those questions."

Bascom believes there is great opportunity for companies in West Michigan and abroad within their sales and marketing strategies. And it is perhaps one of the few opportunities left. Over the past two decades, companies have undertaken numerous outsourcing initiatives, purchased multimillion-dollar supply chain software, and undergone intensive business process improvements across all areas of the organization. The last area that companies have the ability to massively reduce costs and increase effectiveness, Bascom said, is the distribution channel and sales and marketing side of the business.

For six years, Velocity has worked to create strategies for clients in the areas of architecture and design, pharmaceutical and biotechnology, office furniture, real estate development and construction, financial services, technology and luxury goods. It has proven itself the foremost company of its kind in the office furniture sector, and is rapidly gaining penetration in segments dominated by the nation's largest consulting firms. One such new client is VeriSign, the industry leader in authentication software.

The company is also looking to attract more clients from West Michigan, where Bascom sees an increasing adoption of what he called the "West Coast" business model — globally minded organizations willing to take calculated risks.

"West Michigan businesses have awoken to the fact that it's not going to be business as usual," he said. "You have to be outside the box. You need to think about your products and customers differently."

Prior to Whittman-Hart, Bascom worked for Windquest International, a subsidiary of gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos' Windquest Group, putting together North American distribution programs for Asia-sourced consumer products. **BJX**

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