

Posted April 29, 2012

# For many agencies, a small operation is an advantage

Maggie Mills, Correspondent

Given their size, their specialty is quality, not quantity.

Today, many local advertising and marketing agencies are small one- or two-person shops. But that doesn't stop them from attempting to go head to head with commanding big-box firms to handle clients of every size and background.

So for small shops in the Corridor, staying competitive has to be about promoting what they do best.

Iowa City-based Dirk Keller started his company, [Common Sense Advertising](#), in 2002 after years of working in the media industry. His experience, he said, was a mix of all aspects of marketing, advertising and sales — and his network of connections in the industry helped him jump-start his new venture.

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Kirk Monson (back to camera), an editor at MVP Video Productions in Cedar Rapids, speaks with Dirk Keller (center) and Dan Kuempel of Common Sense Advertising about an advertisement that was recently released. (Nikole Hanna/The Gazette)

“We’re supplying a service that anyone who owns a business — commercial or not — can

use,” Keller said. “We think about the broader picture.”

That service can include website development, radio, design, copywriting and advertising. Clients have included Mount Mercy University, Goodwill of the Heartland, Beltone and ManorCare Health Systems.

Over the past 10 years, Common Sense has doubled in size — to two employees. Keller brought on Cedar Rapids-based Dan Kuempel as a partner in 2008 to help manage the company’s growing client base. As both men work out of home offices, they’re able to maintain a profile at each end of the Corridor, while also keeping overhead costs low.

“Most large agencies have an up-charge. They have to pay for their big buildings and conference rooms,” Kuempel said.

“And those things are nice, but that’s not what our business is about. Our clients’ advertising dollars are being spent on ads.”

Another edge that keeps many small agencies stable is in finding a niche. For Common Sense, that specialty lies in buying media.

“Because of our background in TV and radio, it’s what we know, and what we do best,” Keller said.

That focus can give Common Sense a competitive advantage, they believe, compared to larger agencies that try to cover all the bases.

In other words, small can be an advantage.

“Our business plan has been to remain small. In this tough industry, we’ve seen plenty of companies grow and then have to let people go, and we never wanted to do that,” said Randy Behr of [Big Behr Design](#). “We’ve both worked with bigger staffs before, and we just decided we would rather do the work ourselves.”

Behr and his business partner and co-owner Mike Hunstad have backgrounds in design, which has lead them to specialize in branding — designing and creating logos, sales materials, direct mail, print, billboards and websites.

Local clients include the University of Iowa, Alliant Energy and Mercy Medical Center, while they’ve also worked with regional and national clients such as Utah State University and Kansas City Council of the Arts.

One of the benefits of having a small business, Behr continued, is in being able to work with other like-minded professionals.

“We partner with other studios and agencies if we need to. Since we don’t have a large staff, we can always connect with resources in our network to find what we need,” he said.

But being small in size doesn’t mean clients get less of a commitment in time and resources than they would elsewhere, they noted.

“Even with a one-person shop, you can still compete. Big agencies often just assign one writer and one designer to a client anyway,” Behr said.

“They have layers and layers of people, but we peel all that away and just do it ourselves.”

“When you work for someone else, nothing is ever good enough,” Keller said.

“But we don’t think that way. There are good times, and there are bad times,” Kuempel said.

“But overall, the boat is rising every year.”

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