

An aggressive growth strategy combining strategic tech applications with hard work earns Beausejour brother business partners Outstanding Small Business Award 2009

Blastoff Fireworks success lit by savvy use of technology

BY LORRAINE STEVENSON
Co-operator staff

In less than a decade, their business has exploded from a family hobby into Canada's largest wholesale fireworks distributor.

The Beausejour brothers who launched it say technology lit its fuse. Blastoff Fireworks, owned by young entrepreneurs Matt Bialek, 27 and Ryan Bialek, 21, is housed in a 40,000-sq.-ft. distribution centre at Selkirk employing 10 staff — 20 at peak seasons.

They might still be hawking fireworks from the retrofitted school bus on Hwy. 59 that they started with in 2004, had they not seen how software programs could help grow business and expand market reach.

"We had an aggressive growth strategy that relied heavily on technology and hard work," Matt told a business conference here last month. "We used technology to differentiate ourselves."

Their company — which earned the Outstanding Small Business for 2009 award from Manitoba Chamber of Commerce last week — is comprised of three divisions; Blastoff Fireworks is their wholesale division, Red Bomb Fireworks does the company's retail and online sales, and Campfire FX, their manufacturing division. Campfire FX products are found in many rural grocery stores and gas stations.

Goal from the start

From the start, their goal was to be a customer-focused business, helping people select and safely enjoy fireworks, say the brothers. But providing full-time service required full-time attention, and days have only so many hours. The software programs they used helped them do everything else — from track inventory and accounts and receivables to plan routes for their transport drivers.

The brothers have also optimized communications technology to penetrate the online marketplace. Blastoff Fireworks has three interactive websites to appeal to prospective clients. Business is extremely brisk through their Red Bomb.com, said Ryan.



HAVING A BLAST: Technology helped them look big while starting small, say Outstanding Small Business for 2009 award winners Ryan (left) and Matthew Bialek, owners of Selkirk-based Blastoff Fireworks.

"Sales are equivalent to some bricks and mortar locations. It's like having another store."

They also use social networking applications, such as a blog, an online newsletter and Facebook to attract customers.

Their reach is now to over 900 clients across Canada, even to isolated markets like Nunavut.

Look big, start small

They grew because they were able to "look big while starting small," thanks to technology, say the brothers.

"It's the equalizer," said Ryan. "Without it, what we have accomplished would not have been possible."

The Bialeks were guest speakers at Press On to Technology, a technology-focused conference sponsored by MAFRI and Parkland Community Futures to get rural business owners thinking how they can optimize available technology to expand market reach.

The department wants to help support the growth of small business, said MAFRI Minister Rosann Wowchuk, who attended the first day of the conference.

"Small business is the driver of small communities," she said.

"Technology opens the doors for rural business. With technology you can virtually be anywhere you want in the world."

Intimidating

Yet, for all its potential, technology is hugely intimidating too.

"People can be quite terrified with technology if they have no background with it," said Tami Chapin, president and owner of Parkland TechnologySolutions. Her company, which specializes in technology consulting and customized skills training, sees many individuals, small and medium-size business owners overwhelmed and dealing with all kinds of fear and comfort issues around technology.

The key is first learning the basics, Chapin said. "If you have basic skills and continue to build on them, your comfort level is going to get so much better."

Many organizations sponsor free training, she noted, such as programs offered through Manitoba Status of Women, offering computer training free for women.

Workplace Education Manitoba (WEM) also offers customized training in essential

computer skills to workplaces and communities. "We're going out into more communities to deliver more community-based, essential skills-based training," added Charlene Gulak, Parkland regional coordinator for WEM.

Personal problem, business problem

It's when you're afraid to learn, or unwilling to learn, that you're held back, said keynote speaker David Chalk in a lively address on how people's self-doubts aren't just a personal problem, but a business problem.

Chalk knows of what he speaks. He's the successful Canadian entrepreneur who founded Doppler Computer Stores, which pioneered the concept of selling computers and training people to use them. Another business is his Chalk Media, which has exclusive contracts developing online training for clients such as Yahoo!, Royal Bank and Hewlett Packard Bell. Yet, Chalk suffers from extreme dyslexia and a neurological condition that means he cannot recognize a face.

Computers opened up the world to him as his "perfect

left brain assistant," he told the conference. They did the work to free his right brain to pursue creative concepts. Had he not touched a computer — where would he be?

"We get caught up in what technology is, but don't understand what it does for us," he said.

MAFRI staff are able to help rural businesses make the most of many low-cost, no-cost business productivity tools, said Chris Hornby, a rural leadership specialist.

Networking

These would include maximizing the use of the growing number of social networking sites such as Facebook, Google Maps, blogs, YouTube, Trip Advisor and Kijiji. It's expected as many as 600,000 small businesses in North America will be using these sites to market services and products by year's end, Hornby said. "If you're not on it, your competitors probably are."

Technology will change business transactions and operations as dramatically as it has already changed the social environment, said Ray Baker, owner and manager of Baker Computers and MTS Connect in Dauphin.

Already 87 per cent of organizations now have people working off-site or on the road. "In 1990s, if you'd asked how Internet would change how we work and socialize, would we have foreseen EBay and Twitter and Facebook?" he said.

Ochre River's Jessica Nechwediuk, sitting in the audience listening, admits she's not at all comfortable with a lot of technology. "I'm scared of it," she said. But she's using Facebook to market her seasonal rural café, The Heavenly Scoop. Rural entrepreneurs often feel tied to their community, and not able to take on more. "But we have great ideas," she said. The Bialeks' story sparks new ideas in her, she said.

"They're young, they've got innovative ideas and they're not scared to grow," she said. "This conference has shown me how technology can help us grow... but you've first got to get through that 'I don't know how to work this,' or 'I don't know how to do that.'"

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Consumers don't understand what labels are telling them

STAFF

Canadians are reading food labels but do not always understand what they are telling them, a recent report by the Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition (CCFN) says.

A key finding of the council's report 2009 Tracking Nutrition Trends (TNT): 'A 20-year History' is that food product labels continue to be Canadians' most credible and highly used source of information on food and

nutrition. The report also reveals that while food labels are listed as a highly credible source, various statistics suggest that Canadians still don't fully understand the information that is reported on them, the council says in a release.

"Based on the findings of this 20-year report, CCFN is calling on government, health associations, the food industry and all health-related sectors to step up education of food nutrition labelling to help all Canadians have a better understanding of what their food contains," says Franci Pillo-Blocka, the CCFN's president and CEO.

CCFN has been tracking various trends of sources of nutrition information for the past 20 years and product labels have consistently been rated as the No. 1 source. In 2008, 68 per cent of Canadians reported product labels as their prime source of nutrition information, followed by the Internet at 51 per cent and magazines, newspapers and books at 46 per cent.

"Canadian food labels were developed with a large number of stakeholders to ensure information is presented fully and clearly to consumers," says Pillo-Blocka. "The food labels have been well received by Canadians and now the next step is to help us better understand all of the valuable information on the label."

The report shows that Canadians tend to focus on specific information when looking at food product labels. In 2008, ingredients (80 per cent), best before date (74 per cent) and nutrition facts tables (71 per cent) were the information that consumers consulted the most.

While the TNT report shows that consumers trust and actively use the information to stay healthy, current statistics on Canadians' obesity and other health-related issues have reached epidemic proportion. This suggests that consumers still need to have a better understanding of how to use the information on food product labels for improved health, the council says.