

Wisz designs on clothing division

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Graphic design is all about commercial karma.

Graphic designers create the logos and imagery that stand in for their customers, with the intent of drawing attention and business their way. The work they put out reflects on themselves, too — positively or negatively.

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The dynamic is working for Mark and Jill Wisz. In the five years since they formed OtherWisz Creative Corp., the couple has helped many young, specialized businesses — including a canoe refurbisher, a dog accessory designer and a clothing label targeting U.S. Marines — to get noticed and land key contracts.

The Wiszes say their story is one of small businesses helping each other and feeding off each other's strengths. Now they're looking for some good karma to come back their way as they launch a new clothing division, Where to Roam.

Time for a change

The Wiszes formed OtherWisz in 2000 after three of Mark's employers — rTheory, Nex New Media and Syrinex — folded within the span of a year. Mark had about 15 years' experience in graphic design and Web development, and decided it was time to take his destiny into his own hands.

"I wasn't going to take another job where I couldn't know the future," says Mark, OtherWisz vice president.

The Wiszes started the business with little fanfare and no frills, renovating a former stable on their Lexington Avenue property to serve as an office. One of their first clients was a big one — OtherWisz designed a Web site for the Buffalo Sabres' 2000-01 season.

The couple ran a few print advertisements, but focused their marketing efforts on referrals from clients and the www.otherwisz.com Web site. They soon found that their site was coming up higher in localized Web searches for "graphic design" and "Web development" than many ad agencies in town.

"Word-of-mouth is huge in graphic design, Web design," says Mark.

In 2004, Jill, the company's president, took a class for entrepreneurs from the Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corp.

"I remember coming out of those BERC classes saying, 'Mark, I want to help everybody. I want to make a logo for everybody,'" she recalls.

Spinoff effects

Mark says the biggest surprise to how OtherWisz has unfolded is this: "How our Web site sells us without any marketing whatsoever. We get clients out of the blue, at least a couple a month, who just found us online."

It's working for OtherWisz clients, too.

Abercrombie & Fitch learned about Vintage Canoe Works Inc. through a Web site OtherWisz designed for the seven-month-old Buffalo company, which restores antique canoes. A little over a month after



Nine-month-old Abigail gets into the fold as Jill and Mark Wisz unpack the first shipment of their new clothing line. The couple, also parents to a preschooler, drew inspiration from their graphic design clients in starting OtherWisz Creative Corp.'s Where to Roam division.

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Jill Wisz
co-owner, OtherWisz Creative Corp.

the www.vintagecanoe.com site went live in September, the national retailer placed an order for three canoes to decorate its stores.

Co-owner Todd Parmington says the site, Vintage Canoe Works' "only sales mechanism," is generating 800 to 1,500 unique hits each week.

"We're getting first-page hits on Google and Yahoo right now," he says. "We've had inquiries from as far away as India."

Another area company, Lake View-based Tartan Hound LLC, has also increased its profile through an OtherWisz Web site that went live in spring 2004.

"My sales in the first month or so were almost what I'd done in the previous year," says Kate Ross-Buchheit, owner and president of the dog collar and accessories retailer.

Increased revenues from e-commerce, much of it coming from overseas, have allowed Ross-Buchheit to launch the higher-end Kate Ross line of dog carriers, sweaters, collars, leashes and harnesses.

"It's such an important tool for us," Ross-Buchheit says of the www.tartanhound.com Web site. "It captures, really, the feel of the company we want out in the marketplace."

Tour of Duty, formed in 2004 by Niagara Falls residents Mark and Reyna Civileto to market a line of style-conscious activewear for the U.S. Marine Corps community, has

landed two major wholesale contracts with help from OtherWisz.

OtherWisz had a hand in the design of Tour of Duty's shirts and caps and developed a Web site, www.xtrememarines.com, that lets distributors preview the product line. "I think that's where it benefits us the most," says former Marine Mark Civileto, who serves as Tour of Duty president in between shifts as a Youngstown police officer and security manager for the New York Power Authority.

Tour of Duty is a supplier for the Fosters store in Jacksonville, N.C., near Camp Lejeune, and recently shipped its first order for the Marine Corps, which will stock Tour of Duty products at nine post exchange locations.

"I couldn't have done it without them," Civileto says of OtherWisz.

Desire to roam

OtherWisz' Where to Roam line was launched in November with five styles of men's and women's T-shirts and hoodies. (They are available online at www.wheretoroam.com and Buffalo Snee's The Snee Store, www.buffalosnee.com/sneestore, as well as Elmwood Avenue retailers New World Record and Room.)

All the shirts feature a snowflake or "flurry" graphic, some with "Buffalo" worked into the design.

The Wiszes say their new clothing line has been inspired by working with clients like Tartan Hound and Tour of Duty, but is also about extending their identity design work beyond corporate branding into a personal realm.

"From a business standpoint, the T-shirts give us visibility, a creative outlet for our designs and a product to balance with our services," says Jill, who holds a master's degree in architecture. "The idea is to unite the graphic with the T-shirt with the body so people aren't just billboards."

Mark and Jill are excited to be back at square one, launching a new division on the strength of their work for other small businesses — and what they've learned from them.

"They're not straight paths," Jill says of the course of events that led to the new venture. "But boy, everything does come back around in one incarnation or another."