

Candor keeps design firm healthy

By Martin Cash
Staff Writer

CIRCLE DESIGN was one of more than three dozen graphic design firms who were recently asked to submit proposals for a substantial piece of work.

But the catch was, they only had two days to get it done.

The call for proposals had an impossibly tight time frame, so much so that Circle Design felt it would definitely impinge on the quality of work the company would eventually receive.

So rather than submit a proposal that it would have a hard time delivering on, Circle Design called the potential client and said they were ill-advised to try to do everything so quickly.

For its candor, Circle Design got on the short list and eventually got the job.

Circle Design has been in business in Winnipeg for 17 years and has been able to remain a healthy, viable, if not constantly growing business with an exclusively local client base.

What makes the company's development even more remarkable is that, in the hyper-thrifty Winnipeg market,

Geared for Growth

the "strategic graphic services" Circle Design provides are often seen as an expense rather than an investment.

So it's a credit to Rob Peters and his staff that Circle Design has been able to imbue itself with the kind of solidity and credibility that puts the company's corporate clients at ease.

"Your last job is your best sales person," says Peters, 39, who is also a teacher and chairman of the graphic design section of the fine arts department at the University of Manitoba. "In working and maintaining a reputation in a small city, one has to be circumspect in dealing with clients."

With his soft-spoken style, Peters and his staff have become known for a certain thoroughness and a high level of quality.

"We pride ourselves in being honest," Peters said. "If someone comes to us and says they need a new logo, we might suggest to them that the last thing they need is a new logo. Maybe the first thing they need is a new receptionist."

Having said that, Peters maintains clients are drawn to his firm because of its attention to an analytical problem-solving process. "That's why they come to us not because of a particular (graphic or artistic) style," he said. "We have to be generalists in this market."

Peters is adamant that Circle Design staff must feel comfortable with the product or company they're working with, and that there must be a plan behind the piece of work in order for his firm to do a good job.

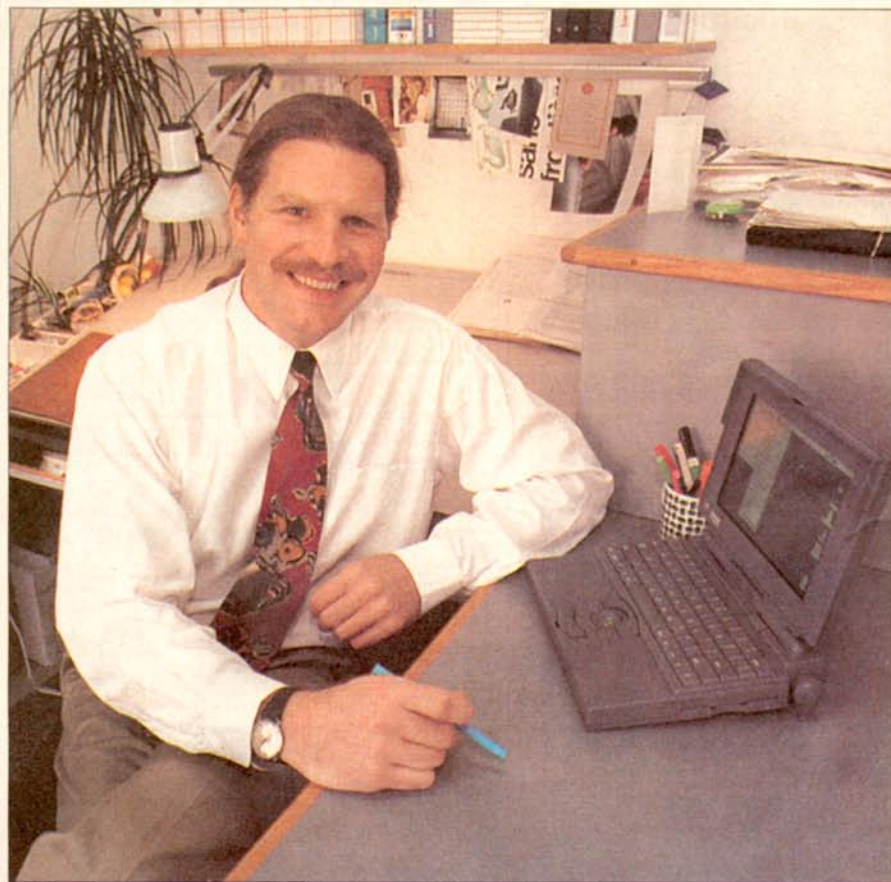
"If there isn't an expected result, then we decline the job," he added. It goes back to the difference between the service being an expense or an investment. "There has to be an expected return."

As an example, Peters said, "A widget manufacturer might come to us and say they want to sell more widgets. But often people are so myopic. They forget to look to see if people really want more widgets. We don't take anything for granted."

RECENTLY, SOME printed work that Circle did for Winnipeg 2000 on the economic development environment in the city won an award from an association of economic development agencies. Peters said it's much more rewarding for the firm when the award comes from a client's peers, rather than from graphic design experts. "If clients get credit for what you're doing (for them), that's very gratifying," Peters said.

There is another criterion Circle Design uses in working with clients that has to do with personally endorsing the product or company. When it comes to Winnipeg 2000, for instance, Peters says, "We're really big on promoting the city. We believe world-class work is being done here."

Another feature that may set Circle Design apart is its attitude towards growth — "It's not the most important thing for us. It's



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Rob Peters says Circle Design's commitment to honesty serves it well in close-knit market.

less important than our ability to do good work."

But having said that, Peters points out that three years ago the company dropped from seven to five employees. But since then, it has purchased a lot of new computer equipment and has been able to build its staff back up to seven.

Peters and the firm's marketing

director, Gord Peters (no relation), also see good prospects for further growth.

"We're confident about the next few years," Gord Peters said. "Not that the market will be easy, but we've developed relationships and long-term partnerships."

Another way of achieving that has been through a professional association. Three years ago, Rob

Peters was the founding president of the Manitoba chapter of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada.

The association now has 100 members in Manitoba, and Peters said graphic designers are now behaving like the professionals they are. "We're now talking to each other more and sharing information."



Circle Design Incorporated

Founded: 1976

Owners:
Rob and Beverly Peters

Employees: Seven

Product or service:
Graphic design, consultation and management services.

Revenue: About \$250,000

Projected growth:
Enough growth expected that the firm may need to find larger offices.

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