



businessinsider

STARTRIBUNE.COM/BUSINESS • SECTION D • MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2010

MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2010 • STAR TRIBUNE • BUSINESS • D3

small business

Minnesota's 'Mad Man' sold on the Web

• John Risdall has grown an ad agency for himself, and his clients, through his aggressive online strategy.

By TODD NELSON
Special to the Star Tribune

John Risdall has been a fixture in Twin Cities advertising since the "Mad Men" days.

Yet the founder of New Brighton-based Risdall Marketing Group is hardly living in the past.

His focus is very much on "The Advertising Agency of the Future." That's both the title of a 60-page paper he recently wrote, completing his long-unfinished college degree, and the strategy he has used to build the eponymous agency he founded in 1972, now one of the oldest, largest and most successful in Minnesota and the country.

"The 'Adapt or Die' series we're doing is really a reflection of my vision," said Risdall, citing seminars on social media and other subjects that the agency hosts for current and prospective clients as well as the public. "When I started, I thought you had to probably change yourself 100 percent every five years." But since then, Risdall said, the pace at which companies must adapt has only accelerated, thanks to the Internet and now, to social media and emerging mobile applications.

Risdall has been at the forefront of that change. The company began building Web pages in 1993, after getting a beta copy of the early Mosaic browser. It started doing search marketing in 1997.

"We found out about this Internet thing and we scratched our heads and said, 'Well, gee, this sure solves a lot of problems,'" Risdall recalled.

Risdall's online strategy has accelerated the company's growth and helped it expand despite the recession.

Risdall Marketing Group, which has topped \$100 million in billings in each of the past 10 years, had more than \$228 million last year. The agency, which has 80 employees, added or expanded more than 100 accounts in 2008 and again in 2009, as a number of competitors shrank or disappeared.

Risdall provides full-service, one-stop advertising and marketing services, encompassing both new and traditional media, as well as strategic consulting and public relations, among other services. Close to two-thirds of the company's work is business-to-business, the rest business-to-consumer. Clients include start-ups, small and medium-size companies and nearly a third of the state's top 100 public companies.



Photos by GLEN STUBBE • gstubbe@startribune.com

The No. 1 rule of John Risdall, founder of Risdall Marketing Group? "Have fun." He keeps the New Brighton office filled with interesting things to provide creative inspiration.

RISDALL MARKETING GROUP

Business: Independent, full-service advertising and marketing agency providing creative, new and traditional media, strategic consulting, public relations and other services.

Founded: 1972

Headquarters: New Brighton

Website: www.risdall.com

Employees: 80

Executives: John Risdall, vice chairman and CEO; Ted Risdall, chairman and president, Tom Wilson, president.

2009 billings: \$228 million

Strategy: Maintain top search-engine position, continue to develop new and expanded accounts through Internet search, uphold "have fun/make money" culture.

Risdall said the firm's flat structure — it organizes a team to work with clients, without levels of management review — helps it offer competitive rates. The culture, appealing to both clients and employees — is spelled out in three simple rules: "1. Have fun. 2. Make money. 3. Make money for our clients."

Risdall was just two classes shy of his bachelor's degree when he left the University of Minnesota in 1968. By then he already had put in four years at a local advertising agency. He recently returned to finish his degree, saying he wanted to show support for higher education and complete his studies before his daughter, Lily, went to college.

Pat Fallon, chairman of the

Minneapolis-based Fallon ad agency and a contemporary of Risdall's at the U, calls Risdall an entrepreneur at heart who seized an opportunity to win online.

"They've done a nice job of going into the digital world with a lot of passion and heat," Fallon said.

A point of great pride for Risdall — and a source of much new business — is that the company has held top spots on searches for "advertising agency" on Google since the search engine came into existence in 1997.

"We literally get leads every day," Risdall said, many of them cold calls from Internet searches.

One of those cold calls came last year from Denise Head, vice president of marketing



Some ads pitched to one of Risdall's clients were lined up at its offices. The agency had more than \$228 million in billings last year.

for bd's Mongolian Grill, a restaurant chain where customers create their own stir fries. It has 37 locations, including one in Burnsville, where its headquarters is based.

"We were impressed with the range of capabilities," Head said. "They fit the needs of our brand. We were looking for someone that can do advertising, creative, do the buy, was very well known in the social and interactive arena and had a good PR group under one roof, and they had those abilities."

At Vision-Ease Lens, a Ramsey-based manufacturer of

eyeglass lenses, president and CEO Doug Hepper said Risdall Marketing Group has performed well in a variety of circumstances, from crisis communications when an overseas factory burned to helping raise awareness of a new brand its had licensed and of its sustainable-energy initiative.

"They were quick to understand our business," said Hepper, noting that employees fought to continue working with Risdall even as Vision-Ease Lens faced marketing cutbacks during the recession. "Our people enjoy work-

ing with them. They felt this was a more important spend than many of the other things we were doing because we were getting results."

The expert says: Al Tims, director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, said Risdall's willingness to change, while still providing clients and employees a great experience, has in large part propelled his agency to the success it enjoys.

Risdall has been more aggressive than other local agencies, Tims said, in tapping into young talent — digital natives, if you will — to help execute his online strategy. Risdall's agency had 30 or so former U of M students in its ranks, for example.

"He's empowered so many talented people," Tims said. "He's not afraid of having people in the room who are as smart as he is."

Risdall also has been smart to work with small and medium-size companies that larger agencies "don't want to stoop down and pick up," Tims said.

"John's approach is to build million-dollar accounts. He does it strategically. It's like investing in growth stocks."

Todd Nelson is a freelance writer in Woodbury. His e-mail address is todd_nelson@mac.com.