

Growth Tools

Baiting the right customer

What happens when your sales stall? Are you able to determine what's going wrong? Perhaps a recent strategy session with one of my clients could help.

This client's product simplified and improved dangerous



SALES

Maura Schreier-Fleming

procedures. Dangerous procedures are a problem in business. When they're done incorrectly, the consequences can be loss of life. That's why it's so important to have clear

procedures that anyone can follow if a task is dangerous. This client's product has an ingenious method for making instructions clear.

You would think the people who write these procedures would be clamoring for a way to make their work product better. But you would be wrong. Why? The procedure writers have no interest in putting themselves out of work. When they saw the power of the product, the procedure writers were thinking, "Now my plant manager doesn't need me."

I told the client to target the buyer who would care about the dangerous consequences — the plant manager. Ironically, the product would not put a procedure writer out of work, but workers got that perception and my client didn't correct that misperception. With a clear strategy to target people who care about the problem, my client is on his way to making a sale.

Forget about selling to people who will never buy. If the buyer feels threatened, that's one I would quickly neutralize.

MAURA SCHREIER-FLEMING is president of Dallas-based Best@Selling. Contact her at maura@bestatselling.com.

ENTREPRENEUR

Rock solid

GERRITYSTONE INC.

Stone company bolsters efficiencies, client focus

BY SEAN MCFADDEN
JOURNAL STAFF

For the principals of **GerrityStone Inc.**, the process of operating a custom stonework fabrication and installation business in a down economy requires some heavy lifting — and not just hauling the 800-pound slabs of granite and other stones that it holds in its Woburn warehouse.

Just ask **Tracy Streckenbach**, who was hired as CEO of the 12-year-old company in March 2008 by its owners, brothers **James and Peter Gerrity**.

"We're in a market where, because the building industry has in effect slowed down, in order for us to be successful, it's very simple: We have to take a significantly larger market share than what we've taken in the past," said Streckenbach, 39.

The Gerrity brothers acquired the assets of an existing granite fabrication company, **Interstone USA**, in 1997. They began doing business as **Interstone Inc.** and subsequently changed the name. The company's products are used in projects ranging from kitchen counter-



BY MARG BERNSAU / BUSINESS JOURNAL

tops to office reception desks.

Last year the brothers brought in Streckenbach, formerly of **Hillview Consulting**, where she was the president and founder.

"We were organizing the company

around more modern lines. I thought we needed a sprucing up in management to improve our sales organization, as well as our operational efficiencies," said James Gerrity, the company's chairman. "And she's done that."

GerrityStone's business strategy since Streckenbach's arrival has included the use of technology to achieve operational efficiencies, a more focused approach to its customer base and the introduction of new product collections.

The company, which offers more than 400 different stone options, completed approximately 2,500 custom installation projects over the past year — a combination of residential and commercial jobs — using stones imported from around the world. It also operates a distribution business, **Black**

Bear Granite, that sells stones to other fabricators.

GerrityStone's managers say they hope revenue will stay flat this year, after seeing it decline to approximately \$9 million in 2008 from \$11 million the

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GerrityStone Chairman James Gerrity said the company brought in Tracy Streckenbach as CEO to improve sales and operations.

LESSONS LEARNED

What are you doing to counteract the effects of the recession?



Julia Tanen
Tanen PR

Tanen PR increased its networking outreach and forged partnerships with firms in London and New York. The result had a slow bid but is now yielding results as well as gained us several new partnerships and two new offices.



Stephen Staples
Staples Cabinet Makers

We have increased our Web site optimization and have linked it to relevant Web sites. We are getting involved in social networkign through Twitter and LinkedIn. And we have ven sold things we have stored for many years that we no longer have a use for.



Sarah Symons
Emancipation Network

We have been more active with our customers learning their needs and requests regarding our product selection and pricing. People are more selective in their purchases, and this is a good time for any mission-led company to re-engage with their customers.

*** Future Lesson Learned:** What is your company's best chance for growth in the coming months? Send your answer in 25-30 words to cmahoney@bizjournals.com. Be sure to include a high-resolution headshot.

Tough times force evaluation of branding strategy

“One day you’re in, the next you’re out.”

Since 2004 this has been Heidi Klum’s signature line on the wildly popular reality television program “Project Runway,” which features unknown designers seeking to launch their fashion careers. It’s a clever line that has become part of the national vernacular — particularly for the Facebook generation.

Who knew that the line would apply to the likes of General Motors, Bear Stearns, Sharper Image and innumerable other established brands that once enjoyed a secure place in the hearts and minds of millions of consumers.

Such swift brand disappearing acts are contributing to consumer confusion and spending paralysis and forcing increasing numbers of established companies to hastily develop strategies to avoid becoming recession road kill.

Sales (70 percent off pre-Christmas at Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy’s!), gimmicks (return your new Hyundai if you get fired in the next year!) and incentives (get a free meal plan on Disney Cruises at MouseSaver.com!) may spark purchase, but without a solid and enduring brand strategy, any company — regardless of heritage — is potentially on borrowed time.

So how can a company best avoid



BRAND
AWARENESS

Rob
Levinson

premature extinction?

Regardless of sector, it’s become increasingly clear to consumer, technology, professional services, nonprofit, higher education, health care and financial services professionals alike that it is imperative to focus on their brand strategy to make sure it is as updated, current and relevant to as many existing and potential customers as possible.

Remember, the flip-side of despair is opportunity, so while the giants may be tumbling at record speed, it’s the perfect time for brands that are second or third in their category to refocus, reposition and emerge as the new leader.

Elevating your brand strategy requires a proven methodology that assesses the current state of your brand, existing messages and visuals, key audience needs, and competitive landscape. The goal is to identify your company’s key features and the benefits one derives by utilizing your goods or services.

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The magic occurs in synthesizing a tremendous amount of research, messaging and marketplace noise to yield a unique and compelling point of differentiation. One that enables customers to instinctively “choose you.”

Included in this mix are communication vehicles such as the corporate Web site, advertising, collateral materials, public relations, social networking initiatives and in-market events.

Key activities required in any branding strategy include:

- Analyzing the competition and diagramming the position each currently owns in your competitive set.

- Communicating with internal and external stakeholders to learn how you can become a more important part

of their lives.

- Refining the existing brand strategy incorporating your deepening understanding of customer feelings and behavior; defining the key benefits you provide to customers, and strengthening the skills required to make and keep this promise.

- Reassessing the logo, palette, imagery and fonts to ensure they are effectively communicating the most important attributes and characteristics of your brand.

- Defining the editorial voice with updated messages, tag line and key vocabulary that collectively create a clear and compelling voice for your brand in your category.

- Sharing the knowledge with all your agencies of record ensuring the consistent and universal expression of your brand.

If you don’t want to be the latest casualty of a mercurial economy, it’s never too late to focus on your brand strategy to make sure your best consumers — and those you have yet to reach — understand who you are, what you stand for, how you are different and why they should choose you over and over again.

A rock-solid brand blueprint is the first step to ensure future growth.

ROB LEVINSON is principal Boston-based Brand Blueprint LLC.

GERRITYSTONE: New CEO sharpens focus on boosting efficiencies

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year before. The drop was due, in no small part, to the challenges imposed by the economy, particularly the housing crisis, Streckenbach said.

Still, Streckenbach says the company is seeing demand these days in high-end custom build projects, as well as in remodels and restoration services. And she said she’s encouraged by the fact that her 45-employee company has achieved a 21 percent improvement in net income this year compared with the same time last year.

The company made a couple of key moves, which actually occurred before the recession took hold last fall, that have ultimately helped keep its costs in line: Over the past two years, it has consolidated its physical operations through the closure of showrooms in Rockland and Salem, N.H.

And shortly after Streckenbach’s arrival, it implemented a Web-based end-to-end enterprise resource planning system, which can handle everything from job quoting to back-end financial reporting — at an investment of less than \$50,000, Streckenbach said.

‘It’s a challenge and a necessity that we provide products and services for the most entry-level customer up to the most sophisticated industry professional.’

Tracy Streckenbach
CEO, GerrityStone Inc.

“By reducing our reliance on a paper-based system, we have achieved a high level of consistency in pricing and have given our salespeople more control over their margins by ensuring all required information is available to them wherever they may be,” she said.

Additional technology investments over the past year have included a Microsoft Exchange server and barcoding technology implementation and tablet PCs for use in the warehouse.

FAST FACTS

James and Peter Gerrity bought the assets of Interstone USA in 1997 and subsequently changed the name to GerrityStone Inc.

Tracy Streckenbach became CEO of the company in March 2008.

The company completed approximately 2,500 projects over the past 12 months. It posted roughly \$9 million in revenue last year.

Another key strategy is that the company has segmented its business into “specialized services” — which could involve everything from the sourcing of materials to project management to showroom support — that are designed to cater to the specific needs of the diverse client groups it serves.

About a third of the company’s business comes from retail customers/homeowners, who shop directly with its staff at its design center in Woburn; a third are builders and contractors; and a third are kitchen and bath dealers who sell cabinets, sinks, faucets and countertops.

“It’s a challenge and a necessity that we provide products and services for the most entry-level customer up to the most sophisticated industry professional,” said Streckenbach, who also said the company is currently adding between 15 to 25 new account customers per month, excluding retail customers.

GerrityStone is also serving its diverse markets with two recently launched product collections: There’s the Platinum Collection, consisting of 12 to 20 higher-end stone options, such as copper silk, which have an installed cost of anywhere from \$100 per square foot to more than \$350 per square foot; and the Economy Collection, which consists of four moderately priced, widely used stones, at an installed cost of about \$55 per square foot, for budget-conscious customers.

“They’re forward-thinking. And their focus on customer service is (also) a differentiator,” said longtime customer **Peter Feinmann**, president of Lexington-based design/build firm **Feinmann Inc.** “They’re a great company to work with.”

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