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Job burnout led to new career in Red Wing

Dick Youngblood, Star Tribune

RED WING, MINN. - It was the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, and John Becker was flying in to Boston's Logan Airport, where terrorists were about to board two flights that they would commandeer and fly into the World Trade Center towers in New York City.

Becker was there for his annual job review with a Boston supercomputer firm for which he was a Midwest sales rep, and he was not relishing the encounter: After 20 years in computer sales, he said, "I had lost my passion for the business."

He learned about the terrorist attacks midway through the review, and the decision to change his life drastically at age 45 was immediate: "My thought was that life is very short and very abrupt," he said. "I knew instantly that I needed to find new passions."

Because Logan Airport was shut down for several days, he had plenty of time to explore his options. By the time he returned to the Twin Cities, Becker had made his decision. His wife, Valerie, designed and built custom picture frames as a hobby for friends and relatives, and he chose that as the inspiration for a new career.

The result is Red Wing Framing & Fine Art Printing, which competes in the crowded custom-framing business with a significant twist: a focus on large-format digital printing that offers photographic quality even if the image is measured in feet instead of inches.

His market includes fine art collectors and commercial clients who use the images to create a high-end atmosphere for stores, restaurants and corporate headquarters.

The payoff is a revenue stream that approached \$290,000 in 2008, an 8 percent gain over 2007 sales and a source of some wonder to Becker because "there were at least two months of total economic paralysis" for his business as the recession intensified late last year.

Even better, he said revenue is on track to approach \$310,000 this year.

Becker, now 53, concedes that Red Wing Framing & Fine Art Printing "is a mouthful, but it says who we are and what we do." Also the where, which is another reflection of the life-changing decisions that overtook Becker eight years ago.

The Beckers were living in Bloomington at the time, but decided to open the business in Red Wing in search of a "less hectic lifestyle," not to mention lower overhead," Becker said. He was familiar with the community because his parents had retired there.

Framing was the initial focus, and while the Beckers did buy equipment and software to produce medium-sized prints up to 42 inches in width, private individuals were the primary market.

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By 2006, however, commercial clients began finding the company via its website, and demand grew for large-format graphics for stores, lobbies and board rooms. The Beckers responded by investing \$50,000 in large-format equipment and software.

It turned out to be a fortunate decision. In three years, the commercial sector of the business grew to 50 percent of the business and is continuing to grow rapidly. Meanwhile, the conventional framing for private customers is virtually flat, Becker said.

Clients have included Red Wing Shoes, the Mayo Clinic, Fairview Hospitals and Catholic Charities U.S.A., plus training graphics for the Prairie Island nuclear power plant and office and boardroom graphics for the Prairie Island Tribal Council, the governing body for Treasure Island Casino.

To keep the business growing, Becker recently hired a sales rep to work the Twin Cities and beyond, with a Twin Cities showroom scheduled to open before the end of the year.

Becker's big break came in 2007, when Hometime, the do-it-yourself home improvement show broadcast on public TV and in syndication, hired Red Wing Framing to produce, mount and frame 30 three-by-four-foot contemporary art works for one of its townhouse projects.

"They came in and spent two days taping us at work on the project, then gave us about 10 minutes of uninterrupted air time on national TV," Becker said. As a result, designers across the country started calling.

Red Wing Framing was worth the exposure, said Dean Johnson, founder and star of the Chaska-based Hometime production. For one thing, "we needed it on a very quick turnaround and they delivered it well ahead of time," he said. Then there was the "terrific quality" of the project, which involved printing on cloth for an image that resembled a painting, plus "reasonable pricing" and Becker's "very good TV presence," said Johnson, who found the company online.

Becker has collected other fans along the way, including David Murphy, president of Red Wing Shoes, who lauded him for the "meticulous work" and the "extraordinary value" of his projects.

Becker was chosen to produce a series of high-end action photos called "Boots In Action" for display as Red Wing Shoes renovated and updated its 150 company-owned stores. So far, the images have been installed in 75 stores and in a number of its 300 dealer stores.

Red Wing Framing didn't get the job simply because it's a local business, although proximity is a benefit, and Red Wing Shoes tries to support local firms, Murphy said.

"We use suppliers all over the world, and we demand world-class performance from all of them," Murphy said. "John gives us that."

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