

Ginger spices up brand strategies

• The two seasoned marketing pros who own Ginger Consulting keep their operation small and rely on new business to keep them at their sharpest.

By TODD NELSON
Special to the Star Tribune

For Minneapolis-based Ginger Consulting, spicing up brand strategy for OfficeMax, Nordstrom and other national clients is a recipe for growth.

The secret ingredients, according to Ginger principals Mary Van Note and Beth Perro-Jarvis, are the project-based business model, custom research and marketable strategies they produce for clients.

“We have an operating motto at Ginger called ‘Be brief, be bright, be gone,’ which is about doing things creatively and quickly,” Perro-Jarvis said. “We don’t have big 12- to 14-month contracts with anyone. We have to earn our next project with every one we do.”

Ginger’s approach has kept the boutique brand-strategy firm bubbling along even in these down times.

Revenue this year is projected to reach \$850,000, Van Note said, an increase of 10 to 15 percent over 2008’s \$750,000.

“People need strategy,” Van Note said. “They need to plan and be smart, and maybe they need it even more in tough times. We’re finding that that’s the case.”

Some projects might take six months, but brainstorming sessions with small companies may last only a day or two.

‘Alpha females’

“The research informing Ginger’s work often comes seasoned with insights from its Alpha Panel, a nationwide female focus group of sorts. The panel consists of 400 “alpha” women



Mary Van Note, left, and Beth Perro-Jarvis, right, use a panel of 400 women nationwide — alpha consumers all — to help them shape their marketing strategies for clients through online surveys, mystery shopping trips, blogs and dinners the firm hosts around the country

in 10 metro areas around the country, including the Twin Cities, Chicago, San Francisco and New York. Members are outspoken, opinionated and influential super-consumers.

Ginger has turned to them for input on brands, new products and services and to learn about their personal likes and dislikes.

GINGER CONSULTING

Business: Brand strategy and custom research consulting firm

Founded: 2002 as RED Consulting, rebranded as Ginger Consulting in 2008

Headquarters: Minneapolis

Web: www.gingerminneapolis.com

Employees: 2

Executives: Mary Van Note, Beth Perro-Jarvis, partners

Strategy: Pursue measured growth in part by limiting repeat work and seeking new clients

The alpha females take part in online surveys, mystery shopping, group blogs and salon dinners that Ginger stages in different cities, sometimes with marketers attending to get firsthand feedback.

"Women ... make over 80 percent of all purchasing decisions," Perro-Jarvis said. "So how can you not spend a fair amount of time seeing what's on their minds? The benefit to the client is that you identify trends that are six months to two years ahead of the marketplace."

A case in point, Van Note said, was a panel survey in January in which members ranked "healthy" and "family" as far more important than "finances" and "success."

She and Perro-Jarvis saw that as signaling the rise of what they call conscious consumption (as opposed to conspicuous consumption). Months later, Time magazine hailed the trend in a cover story titled "The New Frugality."

A Twin Cities Alpha Panel member named Colleen said in an interview that Ginger has discovered "a way to tap into that really difficult, hard-to-find vibe that women might have about a particular product or service."

"I think it's valuable to a client when they can find out very personal feelings women might have about a product, and I always feel very valued and interested in the topics they cover," said Colleen. (Identities of focus group members are typically kept confidential by market researchers so they cannot be influenced by client companies.)

As brand strategists, Perro-Jarvis and Van Note can turn the intelligence gleaned from the Alpha Panel and their other research into plans companies can use to reach consumers.

"We don't provide them with insights that just lay there," Van Note said. "We think it's far more valuable for us to take it to the next step and tell you what you're going to do with this now."

One example is Ginger's recent work helping OfficeMax and its agency in Chicago develop

advertising for new office supplies designed to appeal to women. Ginger's job was "bringing insights about the modern working woman and her desire to be surrounded by things of beauty, even in the office," according to Van Note.

«WOMEN...MAKE OVER 80 PERCENT OF ALL PURCHASING DECISIONS. SO HOW CAN YOU NOT SPEND A FAIR AMOUNT OF TIME SEEING WHAT'S ON THEIR MINDS?»

Ginger's Beth Perro-Jarvis

Spice that makes the meal

Bob Thacker, senior vice president of marketing for OfficeMax in Chicago, said the company, noting that women start about 70 percent of new businesses, is repositioning itself to focus on female shoppers.

"I wanted to make sure the agency completely understood our audience and could tap into the female shopper," Thacker said of the Chicago ad firm, which he said was made up mostly of men. "I knew that Ginger would be able to do that. They're very smart, they're able to get key understandings about consumers quickly, and their ideas are very actionable."

Van Note and Perro-Jarvis attribute their ability to produce such strategic results to their experience on more than 60 national and international consumer brands. Both are ad agency veterans and met at Fallon Worldwide. They left to form RED Consulting in 2002. They rebranded as Ginger last year after a change in the previous partnership.

"We want to provide the spice that makes the meal or makes the marketing plan," Van Note

said. Ginger also was the first name of Perro-Jarvis' late mother, whom she described as the "ultimate alpha female."

Van Note and Perro-Jarvis have no employees and don't want to get big enough that they have to hire any.

They occasionally bring in freelancers and have a quarterly "mom internship" program for women returning to the workplace. Much of their work is repeat business, but they limit that so they can work with new companies.

"We want to cap that at about 75 percent of our revenue so we always have space for new people and new thinking," Van Note said. "It sparks our brains to get new problems to solve."

The expert says: Dileep Rao, who teaches new business development and financing at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Business, said Ginger Consulting appears to be doing many things well, including focusing on branding for the female market and the new frugality trend.

Right off the bat, Ginger's operating motto "alays the fears of many clients that the consultant will be a blood-sucking leech hanging on forever," said Rao, three-time Carlson School Outstanding MBA Teacher of the Year and a columnist at Forbes.com.

Depending on short-term, performance-based contracts also is smart: "Some of the most successful entrepreneurs I have worked with share this trait -- essentially challenging themselves to perform well every time and not relying on their contractual assets," Rao said.

Rao suggested that Van Note and Perro-Jarvis rethink their stance on growth: "Not all entrepreneurs are blessed with this opportunity to grow, and I consider it a great waste if someone has it and does not take advantage of it."

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