



insights into founding and growing innovative companies

IT WORKS FOR US

CREATING A BUSINESS TO SHOWCASE
A SOFTWARE PRODUCT



Caption tk

Mike Meszaros was thriving as a marketing professional in the print world, but he saw the writing on the wall at just about the time the calendar rolled over to a new century. He started Cincinnati-based PPC Communications in the late '90s and was doing well, but even as the tech bubble approached its bursting point, he became convinced that the future of marketing lay in digital technologies. He didn't abandon print—PPC still helps clients create paper-based marketing materials when needed—but the bulk of its business shifted toward the Web, just as its clients' needs did.

“I enjoy the consultative aspect of what I do more than anything else, helping people succeed in a business I love.”

—Mike Meszaros

PPC began migrating toward a particular type of client: sports clubs, training facilities, music schools, and other enterprises that rely on robust scheduling capabilities to make their business models work. “We did so much of that kind of work that eventually we started building our own product,” Meszaros recalls. The result, eSoft Planner, provides small businesses with the kind of management capabilities once available only to very large organizations, Meszaros says. Working with small-business owners, he discovered that managing the back end of their operations was often so time-consuming that the front end was being neglected. “With eSoft Planner, small-business owners can consolidate effort, save time, increase revenue, and drive growth,” he says.

Owners can access the Web-based software from any Internet-enabled device to manage information and scheduling, while their employees and clients can make appointments, input schedules, and rent space at the same time. eSoft Planner integrates all that information in real time, providing instant updates and email notifications to help eliminate miscommunications, streamline operations, and free owners to focus on the most important aspects of their business. The program also offers a secure retail portal to process transactions and an e-marketing component that outsources sales communications and improves customer outreach.

Meszaros’ invention has seen 100% growth in eSoft Planner sales over each of the past four years. At the same time, it has had a transformative impact on PPC itself, gradually turning it into a company with a reliable recurring revenue stream and making it less dependent on new sales. As a bonus, it has led Meszaros, a self-described baseball fanatic, into an entirely new business venture that has a strong symbiotic relationship with PPC.

“Through the process of developing and refining eSoft Planner over the years, I had a

group of users who were essentially beta testers for us,” Meszaros says. “I didn’t always agree with their business practices, and the essence of what we do at PPC goes well beyond just the software aspect. We are committed to helping our clients, many of whom run sports training programs, improve all aspects of their business operations, other than the skill-based customer-facing ones.”

What better development lab could there be for eSoft Planner than a functioning business in the industry it serves? None, Meszaros concluded, and so he decided to launch one—right into the teeth of the Great Recession. Economic conditions presented tremendous challenges to this grand scheme, but, ironically, also helped make it possible. Meszaros was able to buy up several failed sports training facilities at fire-sale prices, and in 2009 launched DNA Sports Center. The 12,500-square-foot sports training facility is a success in its own right, but just as important for Meszaros, it is an effective demonstration venue to showcase eSoft Planner to new clients. “I’m fully transparent. I show them my own numbers using it at DNA, and there couldn’t be a more effective sales tool,” he says.

Meszaros isn’t rolling in dough—yet—but he believes he’s on the cusp of a serious breakout, with revenue from eSoft Planner at a point where profit should begin to improve dramatically. He wants to reward the employees who have helped make his businesses successful, and he’s turning to Northwestern Mutual to devise the right plan to do that. “Northwestern Mutual has helped me a lot on the family side with things like life insurance to secure my family’s future,” he says. “As my businesses continue to grow, I know they’re going to give me the same kind of support in that arena.”

Secrets of SUCCESS

PPC Communications

- 1 Never quit, “even when you get kicked in the teeth.”
- 2 Marketing is the most important part of your business plan.
- 3 Stay on top of your capitalization needs at all times.

RESULTS TODAY? YES, WE CAN.

CHANGING PRACTICE IN
MEDICAL IMAGING



Caption tk

Convenience, transparent pricing, fast service, responsiveness to customer demands. These things don't qualify as "innovative" for a customer service enterprise, right? But in the hidebound world of medical diagnostics, they were nowhere to be found in the greater St. Louis area for many, many years.

All that changed when Harley Hammerman, M.D., and his partners launched Metro Imaging.

As a company founded and owned by radiologists, Metro Imaging has provided professional diagnostic imaging services in the greater St. Louis area since 1994. Over the years it has grown to include five locations, all featuring state-of-the-art technology, a friendly and caring staff, easy parking, and a warm and upscale environment, says Christine M. Keefe, the company's chief

“Our personnel strategy has been to hire only people with the kind of high energy level and great people skills that would qualify them to work for Disney.”

—*Harley Hammerman, M.D.*

financial officer. But none of that happened in a vacuum, Dr. Hammerman points out. As the healthcare industry as a whole—and outpatient services in particular—underwent massive change over the past two decades, Metro Imaging relied on innovative strategies in marketing, technology, and customer service to ensure its long-term success and the best possible care for its patients. “Metro Imaging was conceived as a full-service, upscale diagnostic imaging center. From the very beginning, we stressed the highest level of service to the doctors we rely on for referrals and to the patients who come through our doors,” he says.

During the first decade or so of its existence, Metro Imaging experienced consistent revenue growth, but that began to level off in the mid-2000s. Individual medical practices began adding diagnostic imaging equipment to their own facilities, and hospitals started buying up practices and trying to capture some of the business that used to be referred to Metro Imaging, Dr. Hammerman says. The company responded by shifting its marketing efforts and emphasizing its advantages over other types of diagnostic imaging providers—particularly a concept Dr. Hammerman created called OnSite Results.

“Metro Imaging was the first imaging center to offer OnSite Results, starting in 2006,” Keefe says. “This was totally unexpected in the healthcare industry, but very much what patients wanted.” Turnaround time for patients to get results from their diagnostic imaging tests from hospitals typically ran several days or even a week. Metro Imaging’s average turnaround time is less than three hours. “Patients now get preliminary results before they leave our office. We are responsible for speeding up healthcare delivery and subsequent treatment in the St. Louis area.”

At about the same time, Metro Imaging began shifting its marketing to appeal directly

to consumers; in the past it had focused mainly on reaching doctors to drive referrals. The new strategy reignited growth. Initially, advertising stressed that Metro Imaging gives patients what they want most: quick results. More recently, the company has become more aggressive in promoting its pricing, which is often substantially less than hospitals charge for the same services.

“We also believe in price transparency. Patients should know what an exam is going to cost them before they have it done,” Keefe says. “We will verify a patient’s health insurance benefits and provide them with an estimate of what their out-of-pocket cost will be before their exam. Patients are very grateful to have this information up front.”

To be sure, Metro Imaging faces challenges in a constantly changing healthcare industry, including staying current in a technology-intensive field and making the expensive but necessary investments.

Given the emphasis Metro Imaging places on the caliber of its personnel and the economic and competitive forces at play in the tumultuous healthcare industry, the company is also challenged to find ways to keep costs under control while still providing the kind of benefits package needed to attract the best employees. “Northwestern Mutual helps us with that,” Keefe says. “On a personal level, I know I am on track to a secure retirement, and they are helping us maintain a generous benefits package for our staff when other companies have reduced benefits significantly. This has a huge impact on recruiting and retaining good staff.”

Michael J. McDermott is a business journalist based in Carmel, New York. The business people profiled in this column are clients of Northwestern Mutual. If you know someone you think would make a good subject for Creative Business, please contact your Northwestern Mutual Financial Representative, whose contact information appears on the inside front cover.

Secrets of SUCCESS

Metro Imaging

- 1 Find out what’s important to your target audience and market to that.
- 2 Empower your customers with knowledge.
- 3 Invest in your future through people and technology.