

Knowing your audience is key

Research and design firm helps companies improve products

BY BRIDGET THORESON
bthoreson@bizjournals.com

Kate and Tom Gomoll knew about working for big companies. They knew how companies were trying to meet the needs of their customers. And they knew they could help them do it better.

In 1993, after working for several technology companies, Kate Gomoll decided the best way to work to improve customers' experiences was to set out on her own.

"Lots of companies were realizing that product usability and user interface design were really important, but few of them actually had internal staff devoted to that," she said. "I saw it

| 'They were very open to **TRYING SOMETHING NEW.**'

Sarah Lindquist
H&R Block Inc.

as a great opportunity to be a consultant and help out more businesses."

She worked out of her home, first in San Francisco and then in Milwaukee, after moving in 1994. As the work base grew, Tom Gomoll joined the business in 1997.

The Gomolls, who were married in 1985, are the principals of Gomoll Research & Design, a product usability and human interface design consulting firm. The company examines how people use products by interviewing and observing them, and looks at organizing the information so products work better for the consumer. To show companies how to improve their products for their customers, the Gomolls rely on their background and experience, which includes working at Apple Inc. in Cupertino, Calif., and master's degrees in professional writing.

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SCOTT PAULUS

Tom Gomoll (with wife and business partner Kate Gomoll) . . . "The most important thing about writing is understanding your audience and how they will accept and understand the information, and that's really what usability and user interface design is about, too."

LESSONS LEARNED

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BEST BUSINESS DECISION? "Structuring our business to give our employees the kind of freedom and autonomy we want for ourselves. People can come and go as they please, as long as they get the work done. Also, we pay by the project, which motivates people and allows them to control how much work they want to do."

WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY? "Do great work, and have fun doing it."

WHAT IS YOUR YARDSTICK OF SUCCESS? "If we all have enough work to do, our clients are happy, and we can take time off to enjoy our families, we have succeeded."

WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST FRUSTRATION? "Client schedules. Usually, they slip, making it tough to predict our workloads."

WHAT WAS YOUR SMARTEST MOVE? "Building this business in Milwaukee. We're centrally located, in a stable business climate. We can be unique here. We bring a bit of the West Coast design culture to the Midwest."

Answers by Kate and Tom Gomoll

GOMOLLS: Couple sell research and design services to improve others' products

design is about, too," Tom Gomoll said.

HIRED FIRST EMPLOYEE

After he joined, the Gomolls hired their first employee and got an office at 306 N. Milwaukee St. In 1999, they moved next door to their current, larger office. Now they have six employees and outside subcontractors.

Clients can pick the services that best fit their needs, whether that's research, design or both. The process of investigation, analysis and design can be tailored for a range of clients. Some of the Gomolls' past clients include Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, DirecTV Inc., GE Healthcare, Johnson Controls Inc. and RedPrairie Corp.

Mike Verdeyen, vice president of product development at Waukesha-based RedPrairie, said the firm worked within the constraints of their technology to design the interface for their product suite. Unlike the unrealistic proposals of other vendors, Verdeyen said, the firm kept the user at the center of the process. New clients have found the redesigned interface compelling, he said.

In working on a visual and conceptual design project for H&R Block's Tango Web site, the Gomoll team was asked to follow a design concept without a specific process, said Sarah Lindquist, senior product manager with digital tax solutions of H&R Block Inc., Kansas City, Mo.

"We were wanting to try a different approach to design," Lindquist said. "They were very open to trying something new."

In the end, the firm incorporated some of the changes from this project into their own work, such as more high-fidelity design and putting two designers on a project to do rapid prototyping more quickly, Lindquist said.

Last year, the Gomolls' firm made \$1.3 million in revenue. They are on track to make at least the same amount this year, Tom Gomoll said.

SURVIVING HARD TIMES

But business hasn't always been blossoming. After the economic downturn of 2001, Kate Gomoll left for a position as a user-centered design lead at GE Healthcare in 2002, while Tom Gomoll kept the firm running, although business only came, as he said, in "dribbles."

"We were lucky to sustain business," he said. "When the economy is not going well, the first place (companies) cut, of course, is the external spending."

The company also had to deal with the fact that it did not have a very large Milwaukee client base, which he then worked to increase.

"When times are tight companies are more likely to hire locally," Kate Gomoll said. "Building (the local base) up was really smart because



SCOTT PAULUS

Visual designer Annette Liska works in the Gomoll Research & Design office.

it turns out that the Midwest fared better than the rest of the country."

Their payment system helped them through the work drought. Employees are paid by the project and given a percentage of the work they do for the company, which means the Gomolls do not pay salaries when there is no work coming in. Although employees were not paid for at least nine months, they all stuck with the company.

Once the economy picked up again, Kate Gomoll came back to the business in 2004. She said it can be risky to have both herself and her husband involved in the business, but they have taken their cue from the lesson of the downturn and kept down the number of their employees.

"One of our strengths is that we've remained small. We think of ourselves as kind of a boutique company in that we are very specialized and have very senior people, but we don't want to be huge," Kate Gomoll said. "We want to be big enough to handle it when times are good and take advantage of that work being there, but we want to be small enough and lean enough that we can ride out the tough times."

Staying lean doesn't mean opting out of any growth, however. In early August, the firm began the extension of a branch to Minneapolis, since a new employee is available there. With this additional presence, Tom Gomoll said they expect to be making \$1.5 million to \$3 million in annual revenue in the next five years.

In the future, the firm will continue to use its independent status, which allows them to be

GOMOLL RESEARCH & DESIGN

LOCATION: 306 N. Milwaukee St., Suite 402, Milwaukee

YEAR FOUNDED: 1993

PRINCIPALS: Kate Gomoll, founder, and Tom Gomoll

EMPLOYEES: 6

ANNUAL REVENUE: \$1.3 million

BUSINESS PLAN: Bring employees with diverse skill sets to projects through a combined approach of research and design

GROWTH PLAN: Pursue controlled growth through expansion to Minneapolis

flexible and, because they avoid the danger of larger companies where meetings can take up much of the work day, gives them ample time to do their work.

"Many of our clients have people on staff who might even have the expertise that we have, and the ability to do what we can do, but they don't have the time to do it and the freedom to do it," Kate Gomoll said.

"We feel like we can provide a great service to them by actually being able to do things much more quickly than they could because we don't have all the red tape, and that's gratifying to us."