Living in a fishbowl

Software company credits values for helping it grow through downturn

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Tim Gruidl started Fishbowl Solutions Inc. out of his Twin Cities basement in 1999. Ten years, two recessions and 21 employees later, the St. Louis Park-based data software company is thriving.

The company navigated the most recent downturn handily, projecting 2009 revenue of $4 million, up nearly 10 percent from the year before. And it's prepping for continued growth, recently adding two employees with plans to hire several more in the coming weeks.

Fishbowl is a specialty software provider, serving clients such as Bloomington-based The Toro Co., New Brighton-based Donatelle Plastics Inc. and Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC).

It chiefly works with two software platforms: content-management systems made by the former Stellent Corp. (now part of Oracle Corp.) and manufacturing and design tools from Parametric Technology Corp.

It rents software from both companies, but also works with clients to customize the software to their purposes. For example, the company worked with HCMC to digitally store the thousands of contracts the medical center enters into each year in such a way that contracts could easily be tracked by vendor or expiration date, letting managers know when renegotiation was needed.

The services Fishbowl provides are uniquely suited for a recession environment. "When you look at the space they [Fishbowl] work in, enterprise content management has some natural cost savings and drivers to it," said client Jerry Aber, manager of systems development at St. Louis Park-based MoneyGram International Inc.

"It's one of the areas of business that IT hasn't focused a lot on in the last decade and it's just picking up steam now." But Fishbowl President and CEO Gruidl says the company's success is due as much to culture as to timing.

As the recession loomed, the company fell back on its credo of customer service, ambition and continuous improvement.

He's impressed about keeping those values front and center, too. Employees have to live by that credo, not just "work" it. "We don't want people who come into the office and try to put on their 'continuous improvement hat' or their 'customer first hat,'" he said.

MoneyGram's Aber said those principles are borne out by its customer service.

Fishbowl may be a small player in terms of the services it provides, but consistently delivers top-notch experiences, he said.

The next step for Fishbowl, coming out of the recession, is rapid expansion. Recruiting and finding top-notch talent is the biggest challenge and biggest priority, Gruidl said.

There is a perceived reluctance for talent to leave large companies for smaller, private ones, but Gruidl hopes Fishbowl's momentum will prove enticing.

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