

Despite the downturn, company sees the Creative Signs

BY MICHAEL HINMAN
STAFF WRITER

TAMPA—As a career commercial banking executive, Jamie Hardin never imagined he would one day run a 63-employee company in the heart of Tampa's Countryway neighborhood.

Also surprising was the growth of a mailbox company started in the garage of a Brandon couple as it successfully adapted to market changes.

Creative Mailbox & Sign Designs is more about signs these days than mailboxes. It rebranded that segment of its operations as Creative Sign Designs, focusing on exterior advertisement signs, interior wayfinder signs, and just about anything that needs a word or image printed on it and posted.

The company spent \$50,000 and about eight months on its rebranding.

"What we needed to do was separate the two businesses," said Hardin, president and CEO. "We needed a whole new look to go with this architectural sign business, and that included launching a new website with a clean design-oriented style that is consistent with the business."

It has put a more relatable face on the sign design segment, which in the past has included clients like Cott Corp. (NYSE: COT), BayCare Health System and Hooters Inc., while allowing its mailbox design services to function separately. That segment has struggled with the decline of the local housing market.

"Our mailbox business is still there, and



KATHLEEN CABBLE

Frank Mazzella, an electric sign fabricator at Creative Sign Designs, welds channel letters.

CREATIVE MAILBOX & SIGN DESIGNS

ADDRESS: 12801 Commodity Place, Tampa 33626

PHONE: 813.818.7100

OTHER OFFICES: Longwood, Venice

EMPLOYEES: 63

WEB: www.creativemailboxdesigns.com,
www.creativesigndesigns.com

we're rooting for the market to come back," Hardin said. "But right now, a lot of what we do is in signs."

ANTICIPATING CHANGE

Building a company with one product like mailboxes and then switching to something almost completely different like signs can be tricky, especially when it comes to employee relations. Sometimes, specialized positions on one product aren't compatible with specialized positions on other products, and Hardin faced the possibility of making large, wholesale staffing changes.

Instead, he worked to retrain his employee base and kept as much as 70 percent of them there when he and Tires Plus founder Larry Morgan bought the company in August 2005 and grew revenue to as much as \$8 million during the residential boom time.

When the bubble popped, a good portion of that revenue evaporated. The company's sign business, which had concentrated a lot on department of transportation contracts, needed to grow quickly.

"Being a banker, I had to enjoy seeing other people take risks, but now I've had to take a hell of a lot of risks on my own," Hardin said. "Working in a big company like Bank of America, you had no doubt that if you did a good job, everything would take care of itself. But here, these employees depend on you for their livelihood, to support their families. It was a lot of sleepless nights, but it's really rewarding when you see all the work we've done and the unbelievably rewarding things that have taken place."

Adjusting to economic conditions and

new consumer demands is not easy, and without a sound strategy, wholesale product or services changes can end up falling flat.

Patti Dodgen, CEO of Hielix in Lutz, faced that when shifting to a heavier focus on electronic health information. That sector is big business now, especially with the emphasis placed on it by the federal government's economic stimulus package.

Dodgen had exercised foresight by jumping into that industry five years before.

"The health care side is a training-intensive, highly regulated field, and just getting credibility and credentialed in the health care space was the biggest challenge for us," Dodgen said. "But we did that, and we did it early, so when everything really got going this past year, we were already there."

BE A KNOWLEDGE SPONGE

Foresight and the desire to take risk are the two most important ingredients for a company making sure it doesn't go obsolete with the times. But those aren't the only important elements, Hardin said.

"You have to build patience and stay hard-working, and surround yourself with good people," he said. "We're very fortunate we got that."

"You also have to have a strong desire to learn all the time. I learn from our business, from the people in our company, from colleagues. You have to be a sponge for all this, and that's what I am."

mhinman@bizjournals.com | 813.342.2477

BIZ MIX

Networking Happy Hour

We're putting a whole new twist on Tampa Bay's hottest networking event!

Join us at Dew Cadillac and be entered to win a weekend drive experience in the all new Cadillac SRX or a private lunch for 10 at GrillSmith.

Must be present to win.

DIMMITT CADILLAC



DEW CADILLAC



GRILLSMITH

NEW AMERICAN CUISINE

DATE: Thursday, June 10, 2010

TIME: 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.

LOCATION: Dew Cadillac
3333 Gandy Boulevard N,
Pinellas Park, FL 33781

RSVP: Register online at
tampabay.bizjournals.com/events

Free self parking.

Includes a complimentary buffet and drink.

This event is **FREE** but space is limited so contact us today!

For more information e-mail
eventstampa@bizjournals.com or call
Alyssa Rhoads at 813.342.2491

TAMPA BAY
Business Journal