

Manifest marketing

Kendal King Group puts on full display in retail merchandising

BY SUZANNA STAGEMEYER | STAFF WRITER

The Kendal King Group Inc.'s job is to come up with the perfect plan.

Clients charge the firm with creating product displays for stores that are attractive and transportable, eye-catching and easily assembled.

"Retail merchandising is a challenge," said Phil Gyori, marketing vice president for client Bushnell Corp. "There are people that are posers, who say they understand what it takes to get a pallet program to a retailer, and they don't. Kendal King does."

And Kendal King realized that it needed a perfect plan for itself, too. Although the company is more than 20 years old, Kendal King's most rapid growth followed the formalization of a five-year business plan in 2005.

Since then, revenue has jumped an average of 45 percent a year. The company also firmed up its international reach by opening a formal China office about three years ago.

"For the first time in our history, we've got a vision and a focus," President Drew Loboda said. "We know what we're good at, and we're going after it."

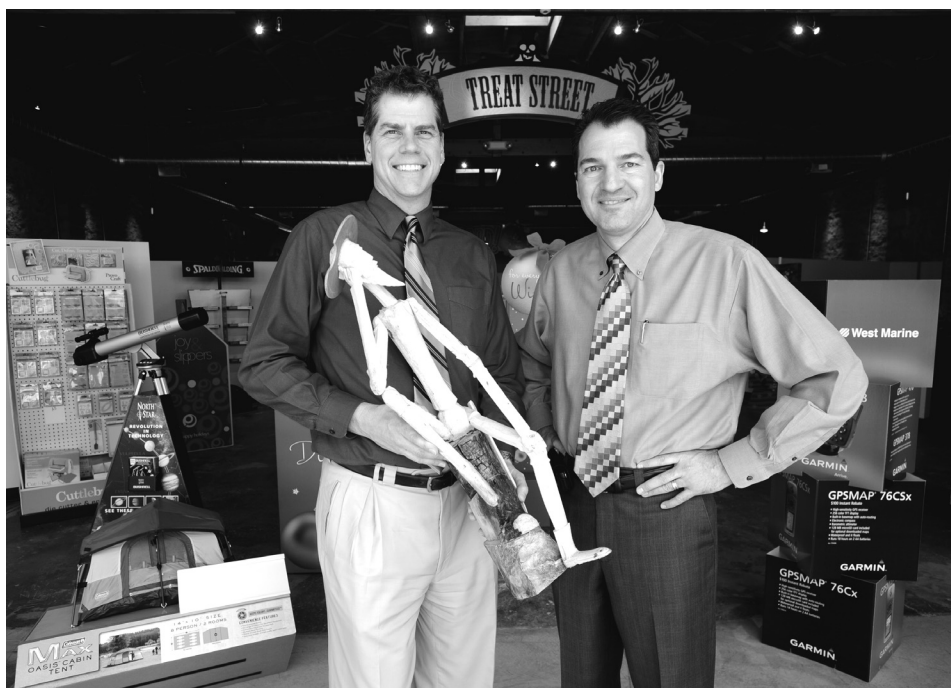
Those top talents include planning, quality control, creativity and problem-solving.

The ultimate goal isn't conservative — Loboda and CEO Scott King said they want to make Kendal King "the retail solutions company in the nation."

King's father founded the namesake business in 1987, based primarily on creating signs to advertise products.

Through the years, that purpose evolved into increasingly complicated displays. A long showroom at the back of Kendal King's headquarters exhibits large and colorful gift card displays, a cordless setup that plays product demonstration videos, glass shelves with eyewear products laid out in a pseudo-desert environment, mini-tents and others.

Kendal King clients have come through



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CEO Scott King (left) and Drew Loboda, president of Kendal King Group Inc., say the company knows what it is good at and is going after it to become the retail solutions company in the nation.

word of mouth, through branching out to companies that supply leading retailers and through a formalized process that the company declined to disclose.

Retail merchandising is a detail-oriented business that blends marketing and production — displays must be appealing and also fit stores' space and capability.

Employees fulfill client requests by pinpointing the creative theme and logistics of a display, including shipping requirements and time and budget constraints, and going back and forth between those purposes to a workable middle ground, Loboda said. They also have checkpoints along the way, including setting up a prototype for ground-up inspection before it hits the production process.

Kendal King prides itself on offering customers — which include manufacturers and retailers such as Garmin, Dannon,

Wal-Mart and Lowe's — a service they won't have to oversee.

"The process is our product," Loboda said. "We take the headaches from our customer and manage all the way through."

Working that way helps weed out any complications early on and enables Kendal King to come up with options that can improve the final product beyond client specifications.

Loboda told of a request from Lowe's for a small display that Kendal King employees found would allow only two-wide stacking during shipment. They suggested that the display be made slightly smaller so it could be stacked three wide and three high, using one-third the trucks that shipping would have required.

"That's the ultimate green," Loboda said. "We make a game of (problem solving)."

KING: 'We take headaches from our customer'

KENDAL KING GROUP INC.

Description: Provides retail marketing services, helping companies create ways to display merchandise in stores

Top executives: CEO Scott King, President Drew Loboda

Founded: 1987

Employees: 33

Address: 1925 Central St., Kansas City, MO 64108

Telephone: 816-569-6651

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A larger-than-life wooden Don Quixote figure sits prominently in a room at the Kendal King building, reminding employees of the company's philosophy:

"We run at the problem," King said.

Loboda said, "If something goes wrong, we call the client with a solution, not an explanation."

That's a philosophy Todd Friedman, brand marketing director for Kansas City-based Ply Gem Siding Group, readily recognizes and appreciates.

Kendal King has guided Ply Gem, a client for about two years, through creating displays that were new to the siding industry and flexible for multiple uses in stores, Friedman said.

"They haven't driven us off a cliff anywhere or let us drive ourselves off a cliff," he said. "We have an adage that we like vendors that rescue us from ourselves."

Kendal King's business plan includes several strategies for continued improvement: diversifying the variety of projects, promoting the firm's name nationally, staying involved with customers year-round and helping customers sell programs, which incorporate multiple products, instead of a single product.



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Don Gore, vice president for creative at Kendal King Group Inc., works on a project at the retail display-filled Crossroads office.

To facilitate those aims, Kendal King makes it a priority to understand retailers and consumers, such as through audits of how displays are used, and includes educational packets with displays to show store associates how to best use displays.

Another area Kendal King wants to polish as a growth mechanism is its sales process.

King, recently chosen for the Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentoring Program, is working with mentor Dick Brooks, owner of Overland Park-based Brooks Associates.

"Scott wants to learn about not only the strengths every manager and salesperson should have but what are the weaknesses or limitations that keep them from growing," Brooks said. "He will expect changes within himself and salespeople as part of his vision for them to become high-quality salespeople."

"He's clearly going to take the company to a different level."

Bushnell has been a Kendal King client

for at least eight years, and Gyori said the top reason for that longevity is the company's service orientation.

He pinpointed flexibility, creativity and a comprehensive understanding of retail as key pieces of Kendal King's services.

"They're not only creative from the get-go, but they have a mind for the back end, when the rubber hits the road," Gyori said. "They create displays that don't cost crazy dollars to ship and are easy to set up."

King said a policy of always paying vendors on time or quicker establishes a rapport that can be leveraged if the company needs a favor, such as an expedited turnaround for a project.

"When your hair is on fire, they grab the firehose and put it out," Gyori said. "They understand project managing and all the different resources that can go into making things happen in short order."

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