

By Jan Wilson



Russ Whitacre, Scott Daigger,
and Todd Wendrick

Sandbox International

Several rules apply to brainstorming sessions at Sandbox International. One of these rules: Put on funny socks.

You read right: colorful striped socks are part of the process at the Madison startup firm that helps clients generate ideas to drive business innovation. So are walls painted a color called “laughing orange,” giant playground balls, and a Nintendo Wii equipped with the popular Guitar Hero game.

“The space is designed to get people out of their normal comfort zone,” said company co-founder and Mr. Big Picture, Scott Daigger. “The environment helps people be creative while they’re here.”

From brightly colored walls to the methodology behind identifying the top tier creative thinkers, research stands behind nearly everything about how the small qualitative marketing research company operates.

Launched in May 2007, Sandbox is the brainchild of Daigger, Todd Wendrick (also known as Captain Details) and a colleague no longer with the firm. They developed the concept for the company while earning Master’s degrees in business administration at the UW-Madison’s Weinert Center for Entrepreneurship.

The freshly minted MBAs started the company the “day after graduation,” according to Daigger.

Unlike many qualitative research firms, Sandbox says it uses new rules to build efficiency into the idea manufacturing process. The firm jump starts the process by finding highly creative target customers for panels they assemble for clients.

Called “All Stars,” panelists fall within the top three percent of creative thinkers. People in this tier generate the most ideas, according to research. Sandbox identifies these people through an online questionnaire and follow-up interview process. “All Stars” come from all walks: they’re moms, dads, students, retirees, and professionals with a dizzying array of job titles.

Some 11,500 people have taken time to fill out an online survey assessing their creative prowess on the company’s Web site, sandboxintl.com. Out of this large applicant pool, the firm selected only 75 panelists, all who are now on the payroll and, says Sandbox, excited to share time co-creating products for clients.

Sandbox principal Russ Whitacre became part of the company through the All Star process. During his orientation, Whitacre came up with an idea to develop a snow melting plow, the funniest product to come out of an All Stars orientation so far, said Wendrick.

“With most of my experience in a corporate environment, people avoid being creative,” opined Whitacre, who spent 14 years managing Oscar Mayer’s Wiernermobile fleet. “About 90 percent of people work in non-creative jobs. This is a great outlet for creative people.”

Panels comprised of five to 12 people advise Sandbox clients – many of them Fortune 500 consumer packaged goods firms – with ideas on products they want to take to market.

“Consumers we work with are highly articulate. They have ideas and can express them,” said Wendrick, who worked as a recruiter for Lettuce Entertain You restaurants before graduate school.

According to Sandbox founders, this is a unique market niche, and only a handful of competitors exist – including Idea Greenhouse and Ideas to Go, both based in Minneapolis, and European firms BrainStore and Brain Juicer.

Wendrick and Daigger financed the venture themselves, with help from an equity investment from the Weinert Center’s Applied Ventures in Entrepreneurship program. According to Daigger, the company is set to break even by its two-year anniversary this spring.

All three principals agreed that Madison is the perfect place to base their business because it has been tagged by Creative Class guru Richard Florida as a “creative hub”.

“We’ve been through the industrial age, the information age, and now we’re going through the creative age,” said Daigger, previously with Strong Investments in Milwaukee before entering the MBA program. “Just having information doesn’t give companies the advantage. That’s where Sandbox comes in.”

Kristin Branch, director of the A.C. Nielsen Center for Market Research at the UW-Madison, said most companies use qualitative market research. Bigger consumer brands such as Oscar Mayer and Spectrum Brands rely on both qualitative and quantitative research to help with new product strategies.

“It’s always intriguing to see new ways to go about qualitative research, and that’s one of the ongoing trends” Branch said. “It’s great to see companies popping up with new ways to go about qualitative research.”

For Sandbox, whose job includes executing market research involving Play-Doh and Koosh balls, it’s all about generating innovation from fun.

Wendrick explained, “I had an office job in a cubicle without windows. And you get to a point in your life when you say, ‘I need something more to motivate me to come up with great ideas.’ It’s fun to come to work here.”

SANDBOX INTERNATIONAL

BUSINESS LOCATION:

100 South Baldwin Street, Madison 204-0594

WEB: www.sandboxintl.com

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Business innovation consultancy

EMPLOYEES: 4, plus a base of 75 paid “All Star” creative panelists