

# CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

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## A successful Identity: *Firm's B-to-B work forges growth in a down market*

By BILL SHEA

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Outdoor clothing and equipment company L.L. Bean is launching a chain of national retail stores after nearly a century as primarily a catalog business.

It needed some niche marketing help.

That's where Bingham Farms-based Identity Marketing & Public Relations L.L.C. came in.

Identity recently signed a deal to do some business-to-business marketing and media-relations work for the Freeport, Maine-based retailer, which plans a couple dozen stores nationwide over the next few years.

Identity counts among its specialties the ability to provide B-to-B marketing, and L.L. Bean wants others involved in the retail industry to know about its accomplishments and plans.

"We felt B-to-B was a segment where we were most confident," said Identity co-founder Paul Kesman.

Terms of the deal haven't been made public, but adding L.L. Bean, whose annual sales top \$1 billion, is a coup for Identity and tops off what's been a successful year for the company.

The company will hit \$3 million in revenue this year, up \$1 million from last year, and estimates it'll hit \$4 million in 2008, Kesman said. About \$400,000 of that comes from seven new clients added in December alone.

Identity targets small to mid-size customers that don't have the budget for in-house marketing and public-relations departments.

One of those clients is Steiner + Associates, a suburban Colum-



*Identity Marketing & Public Relations partners (from left) Thomas Nixon, Mark Winter and Paul Kesman recently signed a deal to do media-relations and business-to-business marketing for L.L.Bean.*

bus, Ohio developer of urban retail centers. Identity produces professional journal articles for Steiner and handles media relations along with organizing the developer's photo database.

"They've inserted themselves into the fabric of our company," said CEO Yaromir Steiner, who has done business with Identity co-founder Mark Winter since Winter was at Marx Layne & Co. in Farmington Hills. "I'm amazed everything they do is so personalized."

Another Identity client is Nationwide Realty Investors, the real estate development affiliate of Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. Both are in Columbus, Ohio, and Kesman said Identity is mull-

ing the idea of opening an office there next year.

Michigan clients include Birmingham-based private equity firm Strength Capital Partners, Farmington Hills law firm Trott & Trott P.C. and Robert B. Aikens & Associates, a commercial real estate development firm in Birmingham.

Kesman and Winter left Marx Layne in 1998 to start Identity. Their goal is to be a \$6 million firm, so they're halfway there.

Identity has a Baltimore office that handles editorial services, such as writing articles for clients.

Thomas Nixon, another former Marx Layne staffer, became an Identity principal a couple of years ago. He's an example of

### A closer look

**Founded:** 1998.

**Location:** Bingham Farms.

**Principals:** Paul Kesman, Mark Winter, Thomas Nixon.

**Employees:** 17.

**Clients:** 45.

**Revenue growth:** Identity will hit \$3 million this year, up \$1 million from last year, and estimates it will hit \$4 million in 2008. About \$400,000 of that comes from seven new clients added in December alone.

the local talent that Kesman and Winter say has helped them grow —with the caveat that such talent

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is increasingly difficult to find in this market.

Metro Detroit's economic blight isn't news, but the exodus of talent and companies because of it hasn't prompted Identity to consider moving. They consider themselves somewhat insulated because they have so many out-of-state clients and because they don't rely on the auto industry.

Instead, nearly half of Identity's clientele is real estate related—developers, lenders, architects, engineers, etc. Another chunk is professional services, such as law firms and money managers.

"Those diversifications allow us

to weather those conditions very well," Kesman said.

And being Michigan natives means they prefer to stay here.

"Anyone can do anything from anywhere," he said. "We're looking at this market as one we can grow in."

Identity's growth provided a beacon for another couple of Marx Layne staffers to branch out on their own. Don Tanner and Matt Friedman started their own PR agency, Tanner Friedman, in January and studied what Kesman and Winter have done over the years.

"What's key to their success is

they treat their people well," Tanner said. "They've developed a good staff that's stayed with them. Employee retention is vital to client retention."

Identity has 17 staffers, several of whom are longtime employees.

Tanner also likes Identity's track record of signing non-Michigan clients.

"Like any industry that's maybe experiencing a downturn in this market, being flexible and being able to be national and international in scope and abilities is key to growth," he said.

While Identity plans to seek new clients, especially in health

care and technology, the company plans to stick with small and midsize companies.

"We don't foresee being a firm that represents the behemoth companies," Winter said.

Of course, if a General Motors Corp. or Ford Motor Co. came calling, Identity would be happy to take the call.

"It was something we never pursued, but we'd never rule it out," Kesman said.■

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