

## Read All About It

By ELIZABETH MILLARD



(Photo by Marshall Franklin Long)

Public relations and marketing strategies are fairly dependable, if a bit well-worn, even in this digital age. Most depend on press releases, branded promotional items, endorsements, and the occasional product placement and conference sponsorship. But Minneapolis-based ARAnet approaches brand building from a different direction—one that's so subtle, consumers might not even realize that they're being pitched.

The company creates feature articles that are more informational than sales-oriented, and although they mention client names and products, the stories are journalistically objective enough that they're picked up by newspapers and magazines. There are two divisions with their own writing teams: ARAcontent, for print publications; and Adfusion, for online publications.

For example, a hotel chain client might be noted in an article about honeymoon planning, or a pet boutique retailer could be used as a source in an article about environmentally-friendly pet toys. These types of service-oriented stories are the mainstay of many publications, and since ARAnet offers them free to publications, editors can use them to stock their story pool without impacting budgets.

Even clients get a bit of a budget break, notes the company's president, Scott Severson, since ARAnet doesn't charge for creating the articles, only for how often it's picked up by publications, or whether readers click through on Web links for online articles.

"It's always a fine line for us, because we have to balance making our stories promotional enough for clients to be happy, and yet have the editorial integrity that appeals to editors," says Severson. "The stories are never overt sales pitches, but they do work in the brand story of the client while providing value to the reader, first and foremost."

### Establishing the Brand

ARAnet got its start in 1996, when husband and wife team Ted and Fran Yoch established the company as the Article Resource Association, LLC (eventually changing the name to just ARAnet in 2000), with Ted as president and Fran directing sales. The idea for copyright-free articles came from their daughter-in-law, Andrea, and the Yochs recognized that the unusual model could be powerful for building brand awareness.

"Our kids thought we were crazy," Ted recalls, with a laugh. Fran adds that the pair thought they'd give it three months, but that timeframe stretched out when they saw the potential for the business. However, potential is one thing and sales are another. An initial challenge in 1996 was getting clients and publications to give the model a chance, says Ted, particularly for online articles.

"People knew they had to have a presence on the Internet back then, but they didn't know how to financially benefit from being online," notes Fran. "It was a really hard sell at first, because they just didn't get it."

As the Internet boomed, though, so did business, and now ARAnet is growing at "an almost embarrassing rate," despite the bad economy, says Ted. To keep the company strong, the pair decided three years ago to bring in Severson, as a nod toward succession. Since both Yochs are in their late 60s, they were looking for someone who could take the company to the next level and maintain the strong values and mission that the Yochs had established.

Severson, who had been running the Internet business for publisher North American Media Group, was a natural fit. He hadn't been looking for a new position, but after being approached about the presidency, the switch was too appealing to pass up.

"I liked the size of the company, and the leadership," he says. "I adhere to the belief that a fish rots from the head down, so if you're looking to work for an organization, the first thing you look for is ethical leadership."

With a laugh, Severson notes that he was put through the wringer during the interview process, and subjected to various assessment tests to make sure his core values aligned with the company's larger directives.

Now that he's firmly in place, Severson looks forward to growing Adfusion and ARAcontent, and perhaps incorporating more video content in the near future, without sacrificing the bedrock mission of the company: to be an information source for consumers.

"We're always looking for a deeper level of engagement between consumers and our clients," says Severson. "We're looking to expand into more niche vertical channels, and refine how we're serving content, but the basic mission to create that engagement will always remain the same." MB