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Arts  
Community  
Obituaries  
Dining  
Calendar

COVERING THE WEEK OF JULY 6–JULY 12, 2005



Photograph by George Sakkestad

For lifelong Los Gatos resident Scott Nelson, designing websites was originally a side project while he worked for the family restaurants. Nine years later that 'side project' has ballooned into one of the largest and fastest-growing design firms in the Silicon Valley.

## Online Firm launched from restaurant designs

Once a sideline, web design  
now a success on its own

By JENNIFER MCBRIDE

Scott Nelson has advice for anyone who finds their small side project created for some extra cash suddenly ballooning out of control.

That's what he did back in 1996, and today the company that blossomed from his little "side project"—designing websites for the companies of family friends, is now the third largest web design firm in the Silicon Valley, earning annual revenues in the millions.

With the exception of college, Nelson has lived in Los Gatos all his life, attending Blossom Hill and Van Meter elementary schools, Raymond J. Fisher Middle School and Los Gatos High, graduating in 1990. He worked odd jobs at Rural Supply

He attended West Valley College for one year and then San Diego State, majoring in psychology and minoring in business. In college he met the love of his life, Brandy, whom he married. After graduation the couple moved back to Los Gatos, Nelson's favorite place to be.

After a short stint working in facilities and marketing at Symantec, Nelson took a job full-time with the family business which consisted of six De La Cruz Deli Restaurants.

At the time, the deli was mainly serving lunch and catering to the employees of surrounding companies, but they wanted to streamline operations and increase Marketing efforts. They also expanded the business to become Freedom Hall & Gardens on the weekends—an all-inclusive wedding and banquet facility. Nelson used his talents to help with the computer system and design a website for the restaurant and wedding hall on the side.

"I oversaw Marketing and set them up with computers and networks; I helped bring them

into the 20th century," Nelson explains.

"I was gaining experience in graphic design. I [taught myself] HTML, Photoshop and Dreamweaver for developing websites."

One day, Nelson found himself looking at the site for one of the business's insurance companies.

"I approached them to redesign their site. They thought it would be a great idea," Nelson says.

Nelson delivered them a brand new website, and they fell in love with what he created, he says. Eventually they ended up telling another business about his work, who also asked Nelson to redesign their site.

Here's where everything fell into place.

"After a year or so, I had so many referrals, and I was getting better and better, improving my skills. I got so much better at designing," he recalls. "I was really enjoying it, so I decided to pursue this creative outlet full-time."

Nelson remembers how his wife, eight months pregnant with their first child, was a

# Scott Nelson

Continued from page 31

bit scared at the idea of him quitting his job with a baby on the way, but Nelson was confident.

"You get to the point when you have to follow your dreams," he says.

Nelson took the plunge. He started out working from home as a sole proprietor, and everything seemed to go well. So well, in fact, that he incorporated the business as Online Design Inc. in 1998.

Business kept rolling in. In time he moved into a formal office space in Campbell and began expanding. He hired his first employee in August 2000.

That employee is still with him today, as his creative director. His workforce now consists of 12 fulltime employees and five part-time workers who specialize in various areas of design and development.

Nelson is proud his company is one of the few who survived the burst of the Internet bubble in the late 1990s.

"After the dot-com crash, a lot of companies in our industry were no longer around because they grew too fast and expanded before the business was really there for them. Some had venture capital funding to obtain huge office spaces and spent a lot on equipment [and so forth]," he says. "We avoided that by steering away from venture capital funding offers."

Nelson mainly didn't want to have anyone else telling him how to run his business.

"That's one reason why you go into business for yourself-you can make the decisions on your own," he says.

Apparently, he made the right ones-not only did Online Design survive when others died, The Business Journal declared it one of the

fastest-growing private companies in the Silicon Valley in 2002 and 2003.

Online Design has also been ranked top in the publication's list of the largest web design firms in the area, in terms of the number of sites created, fours years in a row.

"We knew if we survived the 'dot com crash', we would be one of the strongest design firms around, and we are," says Nelson.

Nelson says Online Design is an enjoyable working environment, and that translates into satisfied customers.

"We enjoy it, and everyone has fun," he says. "We don't have the drama of some of the larger corporations. Plus, it stays interesting because we have such a variety of clients-but we make sure each client feels like they're our only client. If we've done that, then we've succeeded on our customer service goals, and we continue to produce top-of-the-line, professional website designs, logos and full brand identity packages."

Nelson says Online Design has expanded from creating only websites to now offering an entire spectrum of marketing needs for its customers-print materials, logos, tradeshow booth designs, email marketing campaigns and more, and they currently provide website and email hosting for 95% of their clients. They can also personalize email blasts and other full-scale marketing campaigns.

Online Design has now provided services for every kind of business, from the smaller, local shops to Fortune 500 companies. Local businesses they have helped include the Los Gatos Athletic Club, Fitness Clinic of Los Gatos, the Tandoori Oven restaurant, and a full branding campaign including logo and

website for the Forbes Mill Steakhouse. Larger clients include LIFE Magazine, San Jose State University, the American Cancer Society, and Adobe Systems, including managing Adobe's external website and designing their company-wide global Intranet.

Where does Nelson see Online Design in another 10 years?

"We'll continue to grow," he says. "I'll have more people on staff that handle all the day-to-day business, so I can concentrate on sales. I've been working 70- to 80-hour weeks for nine years now, so I'd like to be able to spend some more time with family and friends." "I was raised with a strong work ethic and solid family values from my dad."

Nelson says his wife and his two children-his son Cole, who is 5, and his daughter Bailey, who is 2 1/2-are number one on his list of priorities.

"I really try to balance everything [work, family, friends, fun] part of that is being home by 6 o'clock for dinner every night, and being at my kid's sports and school events" he says. "That's another benefit of owning your own company-when I ask the 'boss' for time off, he usually says yes."

Nelson says his wife Brandy runs a home-sales business and stays home with the kids, and he is happy to see his children attending the same schools he went to as a child. "Los Gatos is a great town, it's a great place to raise a family," he says.

So, what's the secret to his success?

"You have to follow your dreams and do what you love to do," he says.

"That's what brought me here today."

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