



Interview with Kristi Borst, founder of Ad·Mark·Com / Advertising & Marketing Communications by Elisa Balabram, WomenandBiz.com.

Dear Kristi,

It was great meeting you in York Harbor, ME, specially the way we did, with you offering a stranger (me) a ride back to safety when I was walking in an isolated area, thank you again. In my opinion, you are the perfect entrepreneur to feature in our Values issue of WomenandBiz.com.



WBiz. Please tell us about your background prior to starting your business.

KB. While I was artistic from an early age, a high school art teacher belittled my abilities. This and the then-tough economy dissuaded me from pursuing art in college. Taking a practical “what field can I be assured a job” approach, I enrolled in Bryant University and attained an AS in Executive Secretarial Science from Bryant University, graduating summa cum laude. Upon entering the workforce, it didn’t take me long to realize, however, that secretarial work was not intellectually fulfilling enough for me. I almost immediately enrolled in night school toward my BS in Business Administration.

Meanwhile, I became employed at the national headquarters of a major insurance company and, by today’s standards, was very quickly promoted from secretary to a team of 12 actuaries, to secretary in a newly-formed market research department, to market research analyst. The market research department was part of Corporate Communications and it was there that I had my career “aha” moment. I saw my coworkers in the advertising and marketing communications departments using writing and art ... two of my favorite talents. I left my job shortly thereafter to pursue my degree full time. Upon graduation, I was hired by a four-person advertising agency as new business developer, account executive, copywriter, media buyer, and production manager.

WBiz. How did you come up with the idea to start Ad·Mark·Com?

KB. The owner of the ad agency at which I worked was semi-retired. Once I became proficient, he spent less and less time at the office. After being there for

about a year and a half, I was pretty much running the business for him. I realized that I could run my own business just as well, if not better, than I could run someone else's (and knew I would certainly get paid much more generously), so I gave my notice. In December, 1985 I started Ad-Mark-Com / Advertising & Marketing Communications.

I have never looked back. Owning Ad-Mark-Com and being a sole proprietor has brought me great satisfaction. I am challenged daily and wear a variety of hats on a daily basis. Being an entrepreneur (and having a strong marriage partner) has enabled me to be the kind of parent I wanted to be for our now-teenage daughters. When our children were young, they were never in day-care more than two days a week. I would work when my husband was home in the evenings and use those two core days for focused work and/or offsite meetings. As my children grew, I was here every afternoon when they got off the bus. I could take a couple of hours off to be with them or run them here and there, and work again in the evening or weekends if necessary.

WBiz. Did you want to have partners or do it on your own?

KB. I never really wanted to have employees. When I first started the business, I was utilizing free-lance graphic designers as I had worked with a designer at the previous ad agency. After a couple of years, I realized that their designs weren't on par with what was in my head. It was at that point that I became truly a one-woman-show.

My husband of 31 years, Joe Borst, is my on-paper business partner, but he is really not involved in Ad-Mark-Com. Joe works as a controller/CFO for small hotels which don't have the need for full-time employees, so he's able to help with my annual tax returns. More critically, he is my sounding board in a myriad of situations, pretty much on a daily basis.

WBiz. What are the services you provide?

KB. I position my firm as "a full-service advertising agency, graphic design studio, and web marketing firm". Essentially I provide a full range of services required in promoting a business or event to its target audience. As mentioned previously, I do all of the writing and design work. I even do photography for some of my smaller clients, which was the case on the day we met. Some buzz words that people may recognize are logo design (my passion) and branding, display advertising (print, transit and point-of-purchase), both hand-drawn and computer illustration, digital retouching and compositing (another passion), product packaging design, business collateral design (letterhead et al, annual

reports, business flyers), trade show booth design, and, last but not least, web site design and online marketing.

You can probably more fully appreciate, based upon this list, why my job is so diverse. In most cases, I work as an off-site marketing manager for my clients. All media and marketing inquiries at the client's business are directed to my phone number. Clients enjoy the quick turnaround, attention to detail, and "one-stop-shopping" that a relationship with Ad·Mark·Com provides. My largest account, Stage Neck Inn, hired me in 1987. Other clients have been utilizing me for many years. I am always open to speaking with new prospective clients. I have had exceptional results in redesigning web sites which are not working well. Many times designers just don't know how to build a site that gets traffic, but I do.

WBiz. How have the services changed or grown since you started the business nearly 26 years ago?

KB. When I started at the advertising agency, production of ads, graphics, etc. was totally manual. I would type the ad copy on a manual typewriter, count the characters/words and provide this count to the designer for type sizing OR she would do a design framework and give me a sense of the number of words that would fit. We would then order "galleys" which were sheets of typesetting. These were manually pasted together at a drafting table. Many times, with typos or last-minute changes, galleys or type on the camera-ready art boards had to be cut to the point of removing individual letters. In the late 1980's I purchased my first computer and graphics programs, so I have been working with these programs since their earliest versions. It was a leap from designing on paper to designing on a computer. It has simplified this part of the workflow.

In the mid 90's Internet marketing emerged, and I learned the technology to create web sites. I believe I built the initial web site for Stage Neck Inn in 1997. Since that time, I've seen an incredible shift from paper to web-based marketing; I certainly feel that's a good thing not only for our environment, but also in keeping information accessible and current.

I've also seen a geographic expansion of my client base. I can now work for firms on the opposite side of the country. Proofs and "face-to-face" meetings can occur via the Internet. It's liberating.

WBiz. What do you consider the most difficult challenges you face in growing your business?

KB. Probably the most difficult challenge I face is the stereotypical challenge ... cobbler without shoes scenario. I love my job and I get very absorbed in the work that I do. I love to learn and am continually growing my repertoire of and staying

current with my skills. If given a choice of promoting myself or improving myself, I would choose the latter.

Typically my business has grown by customer direct referrals, or by someone seeing my work and asking my client who they use. I have been trying to attend local networking meetings to spread my contact base, but I'm pretty low-key about "tooting my own horn". Also, when I get busy, I don't physically have the time to be out pursuing new business. I am hoping that my next great client will be someone who reads your interview.

WBiz. What are your plans for the future?

KB. My plans are to continue operating Ad-Mark-Com as long as I enjoy the work ... which I still do immensely. I am proud of the fact that I became a business entrepreneur before turning 30. Therefore, I have a while before anyone would expect me to retire.

This is my DREAM job. When the work you do is fun, when every day brings challenges and fresh tasks, and when you feel you're helping other people to succeed and realize at THEIR dreams, there's incredible job satisfaction.

WBiz. What advice would you give someone who wants to start a business that lasts?

KB. I would strongly advise that the business be centered on something you have a passion for doing. In my case, this job combines my love of writing AND my need to be creative. I'm also a bit of a computer techie, so the coding of web sites provides some stimulation for that aspect.

If you don't have a business background, find some courses locally or online or be prepared to hire consultants who can provide this information to/for you. Through my two business-oriented degrees I learned broad, if not detailed, theories of finance, economics, accounting, marketing, and business law. This education provided me with a strong background with which to run my company, and pretty much negated my needing to hire a lot of people to tell me how to run the business.

I would urge the individual to appreciate that there is more than one type of wealth, to consider when setting business goals. Many people focus on growing the business so that they can make more money and have more stuff. I saw that path as synonymous with having employees and becoming a people manager rather than being able to fill my days with the creative tasks I love, so it has never

been my path. I have succeeded at being there for my children AND I have succeeded in feeding my internal drive to be challenged, intellectually and creatively. I have a real sense that I have helped other people and companies succeed. I have wonderful clients, some of whom I have worked with for over twenty years, some just a couple. Most of them are now dear friends. I am richly blessed!

WBiz. As I mentioned, this issue of WomenandBiz.com's theme is Values, what do you consider the most important business values you have?

KB. While some clients only hire me a couple of times a year for specific advertising projects, web site updates, etc., I act as off-site marketing manager for some of my other clients. I am entrusted with their marketing budget and make near-daily decisions about spending that money. I have always done so as if the budget were coming out of my pocket. What I mean is I negotiate on behalf of my client or shop around to get the best pricing from printers, publications, etc. Therefore, my clients' money goes the furthest toward reaching their goals. I'm not sure if it's still being done, but when I started the business, it was typical of ad agencies to mark up both media and printing purchases as a part of their compensation. I have never done this. I charge an hourly fee for my time. I have always felt this was fair to both the client and to myself.

Also, I believe in giving back to the community and do so in donating my time and/or talents to a number of local non-profit groups. I have always and will continue to respond to people who send me resumes and students doing career assessments (I once got a client this way when the applicant got a job and was in a position to hire a marketing consultant. She remembered me and hired me).

This is not business related, but it's one of the main reasons I am featured here: I care about people and believe in not only talking to strangers but helping them if needed.

For more information about Kristi Borst and Ad-Mark-Com, please visit www.AdMarkCom.com.