

Inside Track



ALISSA LANE

Steve Harney is active in the community with a current focus on Goodwill Industries, where he currently sits on the board and chairs the retail committee.

Harney and Full Circle focus on their strengths

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Steve Harney has most of his Christmas shopping done. "I've got a little bit left. I have a niece and a nephew that are 3 and 5 years old, and it's hard to stop buying things for them and spoiling them," he said. He added that he favors Cyber Monday over Black Friday because online shopping avoids the pepper-spraying madness that opened the holiday-shopping season this year.

Harney owns Full Circle, a marketing and design firm that has been around for a little more than nine years. The firm offers traditional and online marketing strategies, design services, web programming, video and photography, iPhone and iPad apps, and social media communications. The company has developed a nice track record over those years. As might be expected, the philosophy behind the firm has changed from when it started.

"When we started, we were so small that we were willing to do anything for anyone. When you're a scrappy, young business, you want to grow the business and make a couple bucks. But you don't realize that it's important to focus on what you're good at. And now I think we've been able to say, 'Here's what we're strong at,'" he said.

One of the things Full Circle has proven to be strong at is web design. The firm recently redid the SMG websites for Van Andel Arena, DeVos Place and DeVos Performance Hall, an effort that resulted in the buildings' having a cleaner virtual presence that focuses more on selling tickets than listing upcoming events. Harney said it took his crew 10 months to complete the redesign. "It should be a new selling tool for them to push tickets sales and to promote the community of Grand Rapids."

Harney graduated near the top of his class at Albion College with a bachelor's degree in economics and management and a minor in marketing. After graduating in 1997, he landed a position in the marketing office at Haworth, a job he said started him on his career path. A friend pushed him toward the office furniture manufacturer even though he didn't fully understand what the company did.

Harney said Haworth was a lean but growing organization then, and getting a job there turned out to be his biggest career break. He just couldn't say enough about how much faith Haworth showed in him at a time when he had little experience.

"I was able to do a lot of really interesting marketing things at a young age that I probably would have never gotten to do at some other companies. They let me travel for sales presentations and do training at 22, 23 years old. I got to work on product development, did marketing communications, got to do some video shoots," said Harney, who decided in high school that he wanted a career in business.

"I think at some other companies, I probably wouldn't have got exposed to as many marketing things in the four years that I was there. I probably got 12 to 15 years of marketing experience in a four-year window, just because they let me do a lot of different things. I really learned business-to-business marketing."

The caper to that story is that Haworth is one of Harney's biggest clients today. Universal Forest Products, Wolverine World Wide, Bissell, Independent Bank and Kilwins Chocolates are a handful of Full Circle's other clients.

After Haworth, Harney picked up some retail marketing experience at Meijer, a field he said is totally different than B-to-B. In retail, he said, he only has a few seconds to connect with consumers, and being with Meijer gave him insights into doing that. Then he went to work for Rapistan, now Dematic, and learned the industrial marketing and communications field. After Dematic, he joined two friends as a partner in Full Circle in 2002.

"Those big three companies that I worked for have given me a pretty good foundation of experience. Now I can go out to really any kind of company and feel comfortable at helping them from a strategy perspective," he said.

Somewhat ironically, what drove Harney into marketing was an accounting internship he had while at Albion. "I realized I was pretty good at it, but I didn't enjoy it. I didn't want to be behind a desk. I wanted to be out talking with people," he said. He then took some marketing classes, held a small marketing job and the rest is history.

Last May, Harney became the sole owner of Full Circle. The firm's revenue has grown by 40 percent over the last year and his staff has expanded from nine to 15 full-time employees. The company's name is pretty unique for its field as similar firms often carry the names of its partners. But Harney said they wanted something different, something that was bigger than they were.

"It's not about our company. It's also sometimes not even about our customers. It's their customers that we're trying to market to. So we look at 'Full Circle' as a name that represents our process of really bringing our clients back to the people that matter most: their customers," he said. "For us, it's about effective communications that drive sales for our customers or helps them to communicate and makes them more effective. That was the thought behind 'Full Circle.'"

Steve Harney

Company: Full Circle

Title: Principal

Age: 36

Birthplace: Kalamazoo

Residence: Grand Rapids

Family: Single

Business/Community

Organizations: Board member for Goodwill and chairman of the Goodwill Retail Committee.

Biggest Career Break: Being hired out of college by Haworth and gaining valuable marketing knowledge and experience in a relatively short time.

Full Circle has its office in the Brass Works Building on North Monroe Avenue, and Harney lives nearby in a River House condo, so he gets really great gas mileage going to and from work. "I do a lot of walking," he said with a laugh. Harney also is an avid runner, plays golf, basketball and soccer, and likes to go boating. "I'm pretty active and on the go."

Harney is active in the community, too. He served for five years as a board member of the American Marketing Association of West Michigan and two years as its president. He has been involved with the Association for Corporate Growth, the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Saint Mary's Health Care, St. John's Home, Kids First and the American Cancer Society. But he holds a special feeling for Goodwill Industries, where he currently sits on the board and chairs the retail committee.

Harney said a close friend got him involved with the nonprofit, so much so that he had to learn more about it, like, where do all the donations and sales receipts go? He said he soon learned almost all of the money goes to changing the lives of its clients through "the power of work" and "workforce development." As a business owner, Harney said that mission appealed to him and he began helping Goodwill with its marketing. He also formed its Young Leaders group. "I joined their board in the past year, but I've worked with them for the past four or five years now," he said.

As for his immediate future, Harney said he wants to continue growing Full Circle, not for growth itself but for his clients. He also wants to become more involved in the community on a professional level.

"I think from a personal standpoint there certainly are a few things I want to do in the next few years, like start a family. West Michigan is home for me. Grand Rapids is home," he said, adding that he is dating a very nice woman.

"I'm at a point in my life where, career wise, I have what I want to do. I own a business that I absolutely love and I love the people that I work with. I think having a solid family and children in the future will round out my life every single day."