

Small Tech: Norfolk's Grow just keeps growing

NORFOLK

A few years ago, Grow Interactive would sort through client proposals, take the appealing ones and pass on those that were less intriguing.

"Now we're turning down a lot of work we genuinely want," said Drew Ungvarsky, 31, owner and creative director of the company.

Grow Interactive's standards for clients are daunting. "Every job has to take us somewhere else," Ungvarsky said. "Maybe it's a new client or a new technology. Maybe it puts us on a new level for budget or purpose."

That hasn't limited business. Grow has snared a string of projects from big-name firms such as Google, Sprint and BFGoodrich.

Ungvarsky declined to disclose revenues, but he said the company has grown every year since its founding in 2005 and is ahead of expectations for 2011. Grow Interactive, he said, has steadily expanded its workforce, which totals 20.

Most of its recent work involves what Ungvarsky called "interactive advertising. We combine design and animation and development, hopefully seamlessly, in creative ways."

Its highest-profile project this year was an ad for Google's smartphone search application, featured in a summer article in Fast Company. The app allows a user to search by voice or photo.

The ad, called "Uncover Your World," can be seen in other apps or games. Grow designed it with 3-D printing, splashing buildings on a city block with bright colors to highlight their contours. "We wanted to use a visual metaphor for the idea that the world around you was at your disposal," Ungvarsky said.

Grow also did a video and online ad for BFGoodrich, featuring snowboarder Shaun White roaring with delight in a race car, as a series of numbers - such as G-force, mph, White's heart rate - flashes on the screen.

The Martin Agency in Richmond ran the White campaign. "They do exceptional work, and I can count on them to do exceptional work every time," said Jeremy Lind, a digital creator for the agency. "That's very, very rare."

Last year, Grow bought the former Altschul's shop on Granby Street for \$610,000 and spent nearly that much - partly offset by tax credits - to renovate it. The nearly century-old building features exposed brick, an original tin ceiling, an open-air auditorium and a grassy roof.

The roof is for dogs and humans, Ungvarsky said. Three workers bring their dogs to work. Grow also has three company bikes, which employees use to travel to and from home. Ungvarsky said Grow plans to provide stipends to bikers to boost energy conservation.

That's not enough to attract every worker he wants. He recalled an Australian who spurned a job offer because "he thought there was not enough going on here."

Part of the answer, Ungvarsky said, is to expand the downtown cultural scene. Grow, for instance, co-sponsored the Art Everywhere downtown exhibit in April.

"We have the opportunity to effect change," he said.

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