

2-Scale: The business of creating the brand, the image and the inspiration

Aaron Churchill, president of 2-Scale, certainly uses his engineering degree in the daily operations of the company that provides design, development and construction of custom identity and branding pieces for its customers. However, there's something he finds more valuable than technical expertise.

"My engineering background really taught me problem-solving," he says. "That's something I use constantly, even before the current situation."

He's referring, of course, to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit trade shows — accounting for half of 2-Scale's business — particularly hard. More on that later; Aaron's point was that the company's 30+-year history was never without problems to solve.

Founded in the mid-1980s mainly to provide traveling exhibits for Owens-Corning Fiberglas, 2-Scale's specialized focus on customized products meant that the company struggled at times. Filing for bankruptcy finally became necessary, which was when Sharon Skilliter, who had previously assisted 2-Scale's founders on the financial side, assumed control of the company and took it through the bankruptcy process before becoming its president.

"I was lucky because I inherited a lot of talented people and most of those employees are with us today," Sharon says. "I never get tired of seeing our teams come together to discuss projects and the uninhibited creativity they bring to the solution phase."

The company achieved both financial stability and consistent double-digit growth — and the challenges that come with success. Bringing the family's talents into the business was beneficial to all parties, Sharon says. "As with most of us, family comes first, and we wanted to be sure we did it right. That's when I discovered the UT Family Business Center. They've been a great source of continuing education along with providing support and mentorship around family issues."

Meanwhile, 2-Scale continued to prosper. Customers like Owens-Corning remained loyal, while new names such as Pilkington were added. The financial crisis of 2007-08 expanded the company's focus to interior branding. Displays and signage now became part of their customers' corporate interiors as permanent installations. Company branding, new at the time, became a 2-Scale specialty, enabling the company to emerge successful from the economic downturn.

Meanwhile, Aaron Churchill was working in sales management in the Columbus area. He and his wife Sarah, both Toledo natives, felt drawn back to their family ties in northwest Ohio — something Sarah's mother Sharon fully understood. Sharon approached Aaron to write a sales plan, subsequently bringing him on board as head of sales. Sharon's son Dan had already joined the company in 2010.

When Sharon decided to semi-retire in 2019, Aaron moved from general manager to president. He and Dan are now business partners, Dan handling the financial and administrative operations, Aaron in charge of the rest: design, sales, production and running the company as a whole.

Sharon is confident in her successors' abilities, saying, "Aaron and Dan have the passion and drive to take the company further and succeed."

Branding, now an accepted part of every company's business model, remains a source of challenge — and fun — for Aaron: "Everybody pays attention to the brand, more than ever. It's who you are as a business. People see your brand and get an impression of your company. Our goal is crafting a high-quality product that's reflective of the business."

He understands the challenges of branding for small companies, noting, "Not every customer has large budget, so we use a good-better-best system. We've also expanded the branding concept into company interiors, an approach that also conveys an impression."

If a customer has an existing brand that isn't as dynamic or up-to-date as it could be, that's when Aaron's enthusiasm for problem solving goes into high gear. "We don't actually change their brand," he says, "but we can explode it. We'll find new ways to use the brand that are visually interesting. That's a lot of fun."

When Aaron and Dan have their own internal business challenges, the University of Toledo Family Business Center is a regular resource. Aaron says, "Sharon got us involved initially. Dan and I are in affinity groups, which to me is the best. The relationships that grew into friendships are fantastic; so is the exchange of ideas." The affinity groups have used virtual meetings during the pandemic so members can share how they're changing their business practices — "Very helpful," Aaron says.

COVID-19 has closed trade shows for now, but 2-Scale is supporting the community by fabricating acrylic partitions and other distancing options. In thinking about how the virus will affect 2-Scale in the long term, Aaron taps into his other management role. "I have to be the visionary, planning for where we're going to go next," he says.

"After the global shutdown, will companies cling to their old brands, or will they change?" he asks. "I started having conversations with Dan in January about being impacted by the changes to travel, since our company is based on physical interaction with customers."

"Do we think that the pandemic is going to completely change how we interact with each other? It's too early to say, but as we talk about the long-term future, although people will be adjusting more and more to remote technology in the future I don't see the loss of personal interaction."

"It'll be difficult. We all know how movies show virtual reality as being common in the future, but the person-to-person connection is still ingrained in all of us."

But that's a problem he feels certain he'll solve, with help from his team and with his own sense of every problem holding the potential for opportunity. "What drew me to 2-Scale was to grow it," he says. "That's happened, and I see our growth continuing in the years to come."