

## **The human face of high tech: AVATAR**

Remember 1997 — and what was hot in technology? When you ran your business, you relied most heavily on the telephone, the fax and on personal computers (which fewer than 40% of American households possessed) that weighed a ton, and probably touted a big 16MB of RAM. Internet access was dial-up, and you had to pay to use the Netscape browser.

Dark days indeed by today's technological standards. Yet 1997 was the year Andrew Newby and Kristin Kiser founded AVATAR: now Toledo's flagship business tech company for web applications, content management systems, online catalogues, and ERP-integrated e-commerce solutions — with clients across the business spectrum.

Obviously, these were people with foresight. Andrew sets the scene: "I was working for a Toledo ad agency and had a group of friends with a unique skill set. Our early conversations were a glimpse of where companies would eventually go.

"We couldn't predict how much everyone's lives would change, but we saw opportunities in corporate sales and communications."

Just 22 at the time they founded their company, Andrew and Kristin were jumping into more of an unknown than many entrepreneurs do. Were they prototypes for techie hotshots out to conquer the world? Andrew doesn't turn a hair when he says, "Lots of that. And twenty years on it hasn't changed a bit.

"We started Avatar without really knowing how to run a business. That was fun. The culture is in a tremendous industry in which you can work from anywhere in the world. That represents a lot of power and control over aspects of the business."

As they approached CEOs and other executives with their ideas about how technology could strengthen and expand their business, the reaction was sometimes resistant just because what they were selling was so new. Rather than trying to be all things to all people, though, AVATAR focused at first on like-minded partners, and on fitting into their existing marketing/communications at the technical level.

More companies saw the potential — which only grew as the technology kept improving. "We were developing the concept of cloud-based software in the late '90s," Andrew says. "Now the idea of storing your accounting software in the cloud is common."

Before long, the AVATAR team was building software that served sales management, inventory and real estate management, as well as survey platforms.

As technology keeps changing, so do clients' needs and the ways AVATAR meets them. "Most of our customers are trying to sell their product in a new way, or moving into a new market," Andrew says. "The key behind digital strategy development and marketing is an entrepreneurial mindset: How do you grow, expand and communicate?

"That's the most fun thing we can do: work with our clients using our insights based on our own experience in that entrepreneurial perspective."

With that *Why not?* perspective, he adds, a kind of corporate ecosystem develops, allowing technology to be leveraged.

In a lightning-fast environment, how does AVATAR stay fresh? Most often by listening to clients, he says. "We do a lot of industrial e-commerce, but we've

touched on pretty much everything. And that's always been the fun, learning about the customer's business, whether it's chairs or tires or buildings or paint or greeting cards."

Freshness comes as well when they stray from technology. In the AVATAR river-view headquarters on Summit Street in Toledo's Vistula neighborhood, you'll also find the HQ for Black Kite Coffee (located in Toledo's Old West End) and Toledo Spirits — one caffeinated, one distilled and alcoholic. Black Kite was created, Andrew says, "because there wasn't a coffee shop nearby and we wanted coffee on Saturday mornings.

"It sprang from what I think is a Toledo mindset: If you don't have it, you just build it."

Andrew and Kristin are married now (or as Andrew drolly puts it, they're related through their 14-year-old daughter). They're both longtime members of affinity groups with the Family Business Center, and shared Leesa Sutton, one of their key leadership team members, to take part in the Center's Leadership Development Program. Her input was invaluable, says FBC Director Angie Jones: "Leesa was a great participant!"

Back at company HQ, AVATAR and its satellite businesses still offer the daily vistas of new success. Is there a place they want to go yet, some direction not yet imagined?

"Every day!" Andrew says. "Depends on whatever hat I'm wearing. On the technology side there's augmented-reality-based shopping, being able to see and manipulate something to create a retail experience. COVID has given that a boost, accelerating trends that were already happening."

Then he says something you might not expect from a technology entrepreneur. "We're embracing technology that allows 24/7 communication and teleworking. I hope it means people will embrace not having to work quite as much, that they can still be effective without having to sacrifice personal relationships."

Seems that AVATAR's vision, though bright with technological promise, is finally based in the human: "I always see technology as a facilitator for the personal rather than a replacement, or a watered-down version."