

DESIGN EXCHANGE

A Joint Venture supplement with the Design Exchange Awards



DESIGN EXCHANGE
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Triple winner rides creative tide

Designers sink or swim with their creations in more ways than one.

Consider Ottawa-based DW Product Development Inc (www.dwcanada.com). A couple of summers ago, staff there begged and borrowed swimming pools at their friends' homes to use after work over a dozen nights. It wasn't for a post-5 p.m. poolside cocktail party. They wanted to throw a new light they were working on into the water to see what it would do. Would it float? Would it turn bellyside up and never recover? Would it illuminate the pool bottom the way it was supposed to? And what would happen if somebody pushed it to the bottom - would it ascend gracefully like a mermaid or come shooting up like a cork from a champagne bottle, potentially goosing some unsuspecting swimmer?

The result is the UFO Glowbuoy Floating Pool Light, the first-ever floating pool light on the market, now a conversation piece in home swimming pools across North America and a silver winner in the National Post Design Exchange Awards.

Make the Glowbuoy just one of three awards garnered by DW. The company swept this year's industrial design category. It scooped a gold for the IS2 Pulse Cardiac Digital Camera, designed to provide a lower-cost, space-efficient and less-intimidating-looking camera for private clinic patients needing a diagnosis of various heart problems. And it won a merit award for its 360 Degree Auto Level Laser, created for Black and Decker, which, thanks to DW's innovations, is able to sell the laser for a third of the price of others on the market.

Those awards are the result of what company co-founder Mike Sirois calls "pragmatic creativity," where innovation is tempered by the realities of the marketplace both in what the market wants and how fast it needs it. That has been the secret to the company's amazing success since he and fellow company principal John Tutton started it 23 years ago, straight out of Carleton University's industrial design school. Back then, they called the company Design Workshop. The name was retooled a few years ago to better reflect what they are all about.

The team-based company has grown from two to its current 12 full-time staff and several more part-timers. Since its start, it has designed hundreds of products for clients in the United States, Canada and overseas. "We always are looking at how the product is going to present itself on the market," Mr. Sirois says. "Is it going to do well? Will it sell well? We don't want to see product go

into the landfill a year later because a new one came on the market."

To that end, the company sometimes works on a royalty basis, taking a lower initial fee in exchange for a cut of the sales. Staff will even consider how well a product will connect with consumers who will only see it on a Web site, if it will be sold online.

While keeping an eye on the market is

important, it is clear that without a quality product the market will not be interested. To that end, staff work on both computer screens and technology that allows them to create prototypes on site.

"We have always been strong believers in the workshop end of things," Mr. Sirois says. "Before a project can be birthed it has to be picked up, held and worn around."

The company moves quickly. Products are sometimes developed in under two months, meeting the need to bring ideas to market quickly.

The pool light was designed, tested and put on the shelves within three months.



The Pulse camera also won gold.

"If the product is not there on time, then the client has just lost that [sales] season," says Aldo Balatti, the company's design engineer director.

DW is one of the top three industrial design companies in Canada in terms of size. Following the tech crash and 9/11, industrial design firms also took a tumble. DW is among the few that weathered those storms.

Many projects face the challenge of how to create something new when there are already so many patents protecting other products in the same market category. This is what the DW gang calls "moving around the patent issue" - making sure their own innovations do not infringe on existing patents while aiming to create patents of their own.

"This is not a 9-to-5 thing," Mr. Sirois says. "I was out skiing on a weekend recently and when I opened a cupboard in the condo I was staying in, I found a similar product to one I was working on. I actually took it apart."

His co-founder agrees. "Everybody's passionate about it," Mr. Tutton says. "That's what it takes. The reward is the successful product in the marketplace."



The late-night swim is a safer habit thanks to the Glowbuoy, designed by DW Product Development Inc. It is one of three designs that produced awards for the Ottawa company.