

FRCH spurs employee creativity

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The bloggers at FRCH Design Worldwide include Barbara Beeghly, vice president, Lara Roller, senior interior designer, and Cristina Ferrari, senior brand strategist. / The Enquirer/ Tony Jones



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Today on Creative Fuel, I learned how to paint a mural, where to buy my next knitted scarf, and discovered that Louis Vuitton shoes emerging from a cracked egg are even more alluring than sitting on a shelf at Saks Fifth Avenue.

Creative Fuel is a compilation of blogged insights from 14 designers, strategists and artists that work for FRCH Design Worldwide downtown.

Posts come from people like Dave Zelman, the design firm's "Director of Reality"; Lara Roller, a furniture buff and chair collector; Toby Harris, a funky Indonesia-born foodie and chef; Barb Beeghly, a world traveler and retail expert; and Marty McCauley, a disc jockey and beat boxer on the side.

At a glance, the site may seem like the typical corporate blog - linked from the firm's website and populated with client success stories. But the effort is actually a case study in employee engagement and empowerment post-recession.

FRCH is an internationally-known architecture, design and brand strategy firm with consumer-oriented clients like Macy's, Hilton Hotels, Sunglass Hut (Luxottica Retail Group), Tiffany & Co., Research in Motion's BlackBerry and Harley Davidson.

When consumers cut spending in 2008 and 2009, and those brands stopped their expansion or renovation plans, FRCH suffered. Budgets were lean and layoffs imminent.

But mid-2010 brought FRCH a rebound in business, in large part from its clients around the world. The firm has since hired 35 employees, bringing its total to 150. More hiring is underway now. Many of those designers and architects began traveling to serve department store chains, specialty retailers and hotel operators in Mexico, Korea, Brazil and the Philippines.

Those world travelers cobbled together a lot of unique retail, design and consumer insights they didn't want to keep to themselves. In August 2010, a small group of the firm's young employees came up with the blog as a medium for sharing and celebrating those travel insights, as well as what inspires them on a daily basis to create, design and strategize.

"We wanted it to be authentic, not a place for us to self-promote," says Cristina Ferrari, a brand strategist who leads the effort with Roller. The group set up Creative Fuel on Wordpress and began posting before even asking permission from senior managers. The contributors developed a small following over a couple weeks, and then made an official presentation. Senior managers had in the past discussed creating a blog or resource for clients, but this effort was even better

"It was so organized and so strategic," says Beeghly, the firm's vice president of planning and merchandising. "They saw a need and pursued it, and then sold it to the senior partners of the team."

Beeghly thought the blog may have failed if it'd been initiated at the top of the company. Its beauty, she says, is that it came from the ground level, from the people most connected to the company's projects and to culture. The group over time expanded to include contributors of all ages and with various interests and levels of experience.

Posts have evolved as contributors find their voice. Most include bright-colored images, photos and videos. Insights revealed here could be relevant to nearly any audience.

Phillip Freer recently gave his step-by-step guide to hand-painting a mural, showing pictures of his own creation. McCauley shared a quirky collection of donut-inspired Valentine's Day cards he received with his purchase at Krispy Kreme. And designer Amanda Seafross posted the knitted creations of University of Cincinnati architecture graduate Jess Baker, who makes and sells accessories through her company, YesJess Knits. The shoes came from an edgy window display at a new Louis Vuitton store Seafross visited in London.

"If we're passionate about it, we blog about it," Ferrari says.

So content stays fresh, Creative Fuel team members each commit to a post every other week. One team member shares the posts through social media and client lists. The company now links to the blog on all email communication and includes QR codes on marketing materials and business cards. Visitors can use their smartphones to scan those codes and watch the blog pop up on their screens.

The blog has grabbed the attention of clients, who often comment on posts or share them within their offices. Hits to the site have also pushed FRCH higher in results on Internet search engines.

But the best result, Roller and Ferrari say, has been the energy it's sparked within the company after the industry's tough times.

"It's been rewarding to see an idea born from the passion of a group of talented young professionals grown into a successful business tool," Ferrari says. "It's a constant reminder of why I love what I do."

Visit the Creative Fuel blog at <http://creativefuel.frch.com>.

Share your thoughts and story ideas with me via Twitter @laurabaverman or email lbaverman@enquirer.com.