



MAGIC TOUCH

LUKE FREEMAN PULLS CREATIVE BRANDING SOLUTIONS OUT OF HIS COMPANY'S HAT

By Julie Richie

SOME OF THE WORLD'S most renowned companies were started in a garage—among them, Apple Computer and Disney. Fort Lauderdale, Florida-based distributor Wizard Creations (UPIC: Wizard2), shares this origin story as well. Luke Freeman, the company's founder and president, began his promotional career helping out in his parents' garage-based screen-printing business while growing up in Bloomington, Illinois. His father, an art teacher, and his mother, a stay-at-home mom, started the side business to generate more income.

"My earliest memory of helping the business was when I was about three years old," Freeman says. "My dad handed me a squeegee and said, 'Let's print some shirts!'" Along with his two brothers, he helped his parents print and sell t-shirts to local high schools, clubs and other student organizations.

Freeman's parents sold their business just before he graduated from Eastern Illinois University with a business and marketing degree, and Freeman entered the corporate world. Within a few years he was managing a large sales team at a national apparel company, but the pull of entrepreneurship and the promotional industry was strong.

"I saw an opportunity to start my own business, taking the small-business experience I gained from watching my parents in their garage and mirroring it with my corporate experience. The combination of having a diverse background in small business and large corporate business is what has made Wizard Creations so successful today," Freeman says.

The company's name honors Freeman's father, an amateur magician who often performed magic tricks to entertain Freeman and his friends while he was growing up.

The Golden Rule

Everyone knows the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated. But how many businesses use that as a guiding principle of customer service? Wizard Creations does. "We are currently celebrating our 10th year in business. Over the past 10 years

we have doubled in size year over year because we run our business by following the Golden Rule,” Freeman says. “No matter the size of the client, we treat everyone exactly the same by delivering the highest quality products at the lowest possible pricing.”

The company’s approach to customer service is innovative and proactive. “Every one of our sales reps out in the field has two personal administrative support employees, called client development managers, because we never want our clients waiting on a quote, art proof or tracking number,” Freeman explains. “We have a two-hour guarantee across the board. If you send in a request for a quote or an art proof, you will receive it back within two hours. This is unheard of in the industry and what truly sets us apart from our competition.”

Full-Service Solutions

Freeman has made one-stop marketing and branding solutions his company’s mission. “We offer in-house design and production as well as warehousing and fulfillment. These solutions are tied directly into our proprietary online company webstores we run for our clients. Many of the country’s largest and most recognized brands trust Wizard Creations to manage their marketing programs because they know that the process will be handled for them without the worry of poor quality or missed deadlines.” The company’s clients include ADT, Carnival Cruise Lines, Zaxby’s, State Farm, Tire Kingdom and Wonder Bread, and professional sports organiza-

tions including the Miami Dolphins, Miami Heat, Florida Panthers, Miami Marlins and the NBA.

The biggest part of the company’s business is its professional and collegiate license division, called For The Fans™, which focuses on creating custom sports merchandise for professional, collegiate and high school team fans.

Overseas sourcing has become the fastest growing part of Freeman’s business. “The promotional products industry has become very commoditized,” Freeman says. “In an effort to compete against this, we want to source products that are completely unique in nature for our clients’ brands and corporate initiatives.”

Overcoming Obstacles

In 2014, a private equity firm bought the company’s single largest client and dismantled it,

shocking Freeman and the rest of his team. “The hardest lesson to learn as an entrepreneur is that not everything is under your control,” he says.

“This was a multimillion-dollar, multi-year agreement encompassing over 80 locations nationally. We provided this client with every aspect of their marketing collateral from uniforms to promotional products and printing. To lose this account through no fault of our own was incredibly devastating.”

But, Freeman adds, there was a silver lining. “We took this hardship and turned it into a positive outcome. We focused on restructuring our sales department, changing from individual goals to team-based goals, so that the more the company sold, the better everyone did. It created a team environment around winning.”

While some companies

might implement a hiring freeze or even lay off people after such a setback, Freeman did the opposite. “The extra bodies were tough to absorb at first, but ultimately it helped us perfect our sales process and allowed our other core sales professionals and me to spend more time in the field with our existing business. This led to growth in our existing client base to new product lines, and it also led to referrals,” Freeman says. In 2015, not only did the company make up for all the business it lost, but also increased its business by 30 percent. In 2016, business is up more than 40 percent in the first quarter. “It feels so rewarding to overcome obstacles, especially when you have an incredible team backing you up,” he adds. **PPB**

Julie Richie is associate editor for PPB.



Wizard Creations’ Founder and President **Luke Freeman** (center) and wife Mara (center right) with the rest of the Wizard Creations team at the company’s headquarters in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.