



BY MICHAEL J. MCDERMOTT

BROWNTROUT RISING

From home-based business to industry leader

BrownTrout Publishers has collected its share of accolades over its 20 years in business, including two “Vendor Partner of the Year” awards from Borders Group for its merchandising and distribution prowess.

The company credits its success to a relatively simple formula: unwavering commitment to creating excellent products, providing the highest level of service, and being responsive to changing market needs. As with most “simple” formulas, however, the devil is in the details, and the trio behind BrownTrout has never lost sight of that. As a result, it stands today as the leading publisher of calendars worldwide and the top supplier to mega-chains such as Wal-Mart Stores and Borders Books & Music.

BrownTrout is a business born of creativity. Twenty years ago, the founders, Marc, Mike, and Wendover Brown, shared an interest in the environmental movement, and that wasn’t all they had in common. Marc and Wendover are husband and wife, and Mike and Marc are twins—and identical twins.

From the start, this has been a family business, and that flavor has only intensified over time. Today, of the 36 people who work at the company’s headquarters, 26 are related to someone else working there. As Wendover puts it, “If you spend so much time at your work, it’s nice to work with those you love.”

The Browns’ participation in the environmental movement led them to recognize an opportunity to raise awareness of the natural environment through the publication of large-format photography. “The calendar is a perfect product to showcase this kind of

creative work,” says Wendover, who serves as BrownTrout’s publisher and secretary/treasurer of its board of directors.

Initially, BrownTrout’s creative vision was to publish exhibit-format photographic books and wilderness calendars with regional themes, providing access to a single-source supplier for retailers who wanted to include items of regional interest in their merchandise mix.

Among the first titles published by the Browns was a series featuring photographs of several state wilderness areas and the National Parks. The line quickly grew to include a title for each state and a selection of calendars for every region, including regional wildflowers, barns, coastal areas, and wild lands.

Reflecting on the company’s beginnings from the vantage point of two decades of success, company president Marc Brown offers an interesting description of what BrownTrout does and what gives it its unique personality:

“In this crazy business, we turn the years as they pass into consumer products with little more permanence than the years themselves: ephemeral wall art and decorations; a scenic asylum for those working in cubicles; and a means of self-definition by association with one or another theme, whether black cats or outhouses.”

The company, Marc says, is in many ways a pro-

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—Wendover Brown



jection of its founders' imaginations and creative impulses, and it employs various elements of their lives in its product composition. That theme is reflected even in the company's business identity, "Brown Trout" being a playful name Marc and Wendover called their son when he was just an infant.

Now headquartered in San Francisco, Brown-Trout opened its doors in Salt Lake City in 1986, publishing just three titles of 1987 calendars that first year: *Wild & Scenic Idaho*, *Wild & Scenic Florida*, and *Great Salt Lake City*. Sticking to its original plan, it went on to produce annual calendars on all 50

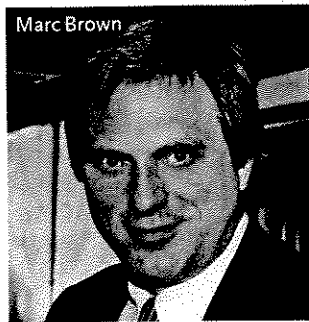
states and many Canadian provinces, as well as numerous cities and other significant geographic areas, an assortment it continues to publish today.

It began expanding into other areas, including calendars featuring photographs of animals, in 1991. That year saw the introduction of *Desert Wildlife*, *Florida Wildlife*, and *Rocky Mountain Wildlife*, followed in 1992 with the rollout of "The Literate Beast," a series of dog, cat, and horse calendars. It expanded that series the following year, initiating a range of dog, cat, and horse breed calendars that has grown into the largest, most successful, and most consistent-

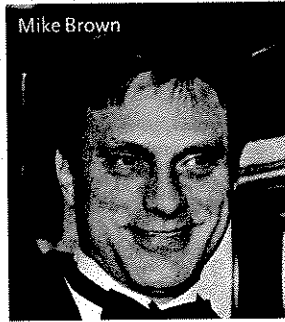
ly performing selection of calendars in the world.

BrownTrout's growth trajectory was established right from the start, and its selection of titles passed 100 in 1994, 500 in 1998, and 1,000 this year. The Browns hired their first nonfamily employee in 1990—David Taff, the company's operations manager, who is still with them—and today employ more than 150 people.

While the company's road to success has been a steady upward climb, it hasn't been without a few bumps. One that Mike, vice president and publisher, recalls was a difficulty



Marc Brown



Mike Brown



Wendover Brown

communicating the venture's commercial potential to traditional financing sources. BrownTrout's product line grew rapidly—helped in part by excellent credit terms extended by offshore printers—but there is a strong seasonal aspect to the business, which creates unusual cash flow requirements.

"Traditional lenders such as banks just weren't familiar with the cash flow patterns in this business," he says. "An early challenge was finding a lender who could grasp the nature of what we were doing and then building an excellent working relationship with that lender."

Another challenge was the relative maturity and penetration of BrownTrout's primary product line in United States markets. Ultimately, it met that challenge by establishing affiliates in nine foreign countries—Canada, Mexico, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand—thus gaining entry to new markets with greater untapped potential. It also mounted a campaign encouraging online retailers to



develop online venues for calendars.

Like most entrepreneurs, the Browns made some mistakes along the way. Like most successful entrepreneurs, they also learned from them. "We've made a few missteps," Wendover concedes, pointing to some celebrity licensing deals that failed to generate enough revenue to cover the guarantees as an example.

"Sometimes it's difficult to learn that what you think should be successful simply does not work in the marketplace. For example, it was hard to learn the lesson that there are more people who want to buy a calendar with photographs of dachshund puppies than those who want one with Edvard Munch paintings," she says.

The most painful lesson BrownTrout's principals had to learn was also one of the most valuable. The company launched its own printing operation in 1998,

an idea that made good business sense at the time. However, the on-demand advantages of an in-house printing plant were gradually eroded by the high costs of running the plant in the U.S. In July 2005 the partners came to grips with the fact that the

printing operation could no longer be justified on a cost-effectiveness basis.

"The cost of operating a printing plant in California made this difficult decision a necessary one," Wendover says. "The lesson we learned was that it is extremely important to keep monitoring the supply chain as it evolves."

As they met and overcame various challenges, the Browns learned many more valuable lessons, including the importance of not overreacting. "Gradually we learned that all problems are resolvable," Mike says. "As Napoleon said," adds Wendover, "Fortune favors the bold."

To be sure, the highs have outnumbered the lows for the three partners over the past two decades, and BrownTrout continued to grow through it all. Its most recent calendar imprint, Faces, features an eclectic collection of pop culture icons such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, the Three Stooges, John Wayne, and the Beatles.

Its main catalogue now features more than 1,000

titles in some 20 categories, ranging from "Mind, Body & Spirit" to "Automobiles & Machinery." Among the new titles being introduced in 2007 calendars are *Fashion Backstage Deluxe*, *French Country Flowers* by Deborah Schenck, *Flyfishing*, and *Lighthouses* by Plisson *Deluxe*.

Over the years BrownTrout has also provided its founders with other avenues to express their creative bents, such as the publication of an extraordinary series of landscape photography and natural history exhibit-format books.

A recent title, *Within the Stone*, features eye-popping color photographs of polished sections of rock by Bill Atkinson, a neuroscientist turned computer scientist turned nature photographer, who has developed an avant-garde digital printing method that marries computer technology and artistic photographic methods.

The book's photographs are accompanied by literary pieces commissioned from writers known for their achievements in both artistic and scientific modes, such as poet and psychologist Diane Ackerman, *New York*

Times reporter and Hollywood screenwriter Andrew Revkin, and NASA biologist and architect Tyler Volk. The writers were asked to free-associate with their assigned photographs as though they were high-level Rorschach patterns.

For the Browns, business as a family affair has been a satisfying experience, one that has allowed them to harness their individual and collective creativity in ways that otherwise might not have been possible. Its success validates the effectiveness of its "simple" formula and reflects the values that are important to its founders, as individuals and as business owners.

Lesson learned:
It is extremely important to keep monitoring the supply chain as it evolves.

Michael J. McDermott is a freelance business writer based in Carmel, New York. Businesses in this column are Northwestern Mutual Network clients. BrownTrout was nominated for inclusion by Northwestern Mutual Network Representative Peter Miller. If you have a candidate, e-mail the information to cgrace@forbes.com.

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