

Independent Business Solutions

HOW A BAY AREA PR SHOP CAME TO BE

By Alexander Curyea

At 51, John Knox seems to be hitting his stride. This 5th generation San Franciscan has managed to buck certain rules of how to run a Bay Area PR shop. And, he's been doing it for 16 years. For one thing, his company, Knox Communications, has no Web site. Another fact is that with a dozen very strong clients, John remains a one-man show.

First, some history:

John attended Lowell High School before earning his degree in rhetoric from UC Davis. His first job out of school was in book publishing. His first PR experience was working in the PR department of St. Mary's Hospital for seven years. This is where John found his niche in healthcare PR. He handled a lot of crisis PR from some of the first AIDS cases, including the national story of a nun who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion (when the condition was known mainly as "gay men's disease"), to the time a sick U.S. Senator was rushed to the hospital with plenty of labor issues mixed in as well.

But John was looking for broader experience. When the opportunity arose, he joined Burson Marsteller's San Francisco team as a healthcare expert. John says he enjoyed his time there, soaking in the agency experience and working as much as possible with top people who were experts in various fields. He rose through the ranks and was made an Account Supervisor with-

in a few years.

In 1988, he knew he wanted a change, but didn't know his next steps. So slowly and quietly, he let people know he was looking for something else. He told selected colleagues and talked with other agencies. He planned on looking for a full-time job, but found that he was being offered contract work on a reliable schedule.

He kept interviewing, not thinking about the possibility of making a living as a full-time contractor, especially as his wife had recently stopped working to take care of their two small children. By the end of the year, though, he had plenty of work. It was a time of economic downturn, and John noticed many companies cutting internal staff, creating an increasing need for consultants. That's when he began to think that "this is the next full-time job." Trusting his instincts, he took an office, printed up letterhead, and began doing business as Knox Communications.

It hasn't been an entirely seamless transition. In 1990, his main client, a hospital that had passed an increasing amount of work his way, drastically reduced business. John said, "That was a scary moment. I was naive as a businessman. That's when I realized not to put all your eggs in one basket."

He advises that while it's smart to have an area of specialty, don't count on one client or one area of business for your livelihood. He's kept that philosophy ever since.



John M. Knox

Of PRSA, John says, "it's the most relevant of all organizations I belong to. PRSA is really aware of the needs of the independent communicator as well as being very focused on strategy and tactics relevant to business." John also maintains membership in IABC, where he has twice served on the board of the San Francisco chapter and chaired the Independent Communicators Roundtable. He is also past chair of the Public Relations Round Table.

John says he would not retire today, even if he could. "The variety of work in the course of a day, the week, the month, is anything but boring. Getting to use my skills, writing, speaking, strategic thinking, business and management keep me going." He admits there is one downside to working for yourself - no IT department.

Which brings us back to his lack of a corporate Web site. John says, "Business is good, coming mainly from referrals. I do a lot of interpersonal marketing, and the Web site is on my 'to do' list, but it's just not on the front burner." His client list includes Sun Microsystems, Kaiser Permanente, AT&T, Levi's, Charles Schwab, and Genentech, to name a few. Not too bad for a one-man band.