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President of Real Art Design Group Chris Wire

B2B Staff Photo by Teesha McClam

# A culture of creativity and hard work

Real Art Design Group continues to hit home runs with its 'Field of Dreams' philosophy

By Kristen Wicker  
B2B Contributor

Chris Wire is really into his cellophane-wrapped package of red and white M&Ms. Then again, this isn't just any bag of candy: The M&Ms bear such sayings as "Real Art Rocks" and help tell the story of the company Wire co-owns, communications firm Real Art Design Group.

The M&Ms were a gift from one of Real Art's clients — paid for via an employee office collection — as a thank-you for the long hours Real Art staffers put in during the week (and weekend) between Christmas and New Year's Day, when the firm technically is closed.

"Before, during and after the holidays, it was basically a 24-7 work experience. Real Art really stepped up," said Chris Handyside, associate

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creative director for Wunderman Team Detroit, of the project the two crews were working on — a high-profile Web site for the Ford Motor Company's F-150.

"They put a lot of thought behind what they do," Handyside added. "They don't just give you what you ask for — they give you more, and they do it with a lot of creativity."

Indeed, this ongoing enterprise and creative flair form the backbone of Real Art's culture.



"I thought if we concentrated on creative (services), the clients, money, success and accolades would follow," said Wire, who started at Real Art as an intern in the early-'90s and bought the company from its founder during a period of several years.

Wire's "Field of Dreams" philosophy has worked: Real Art Design Group has attained record years in revenue since before 2003. It has averaged more than 25 percent growth per year for the past five years and 2007 was its best overall year to date, Wire said.

Also during this time, Real Art's ranks have swelled with the hiring of an additional four to five employees per year, and it now has 30 employees in downtown Dayton and seven in Chicago, where it opened a satellite office a few years back. Its numbers are almost certain to grow: Real Art recently purchased a new building near Fifth Third Field in downtown Dayton, which it hopes to occupy by fall 2008. The new building is more than triple the size of Real Art's current digs in the Oregon District, where staffers are squeezed into areas, such as conference rooms, not intended as work spaces.

Ironically, however, the culture at the crux of this success is all about the innovative, newfangled and off-the-chain.

"There are so many self-help business books out there and if we look at any of them, the way we're doing it is all wrong," Wire said. "We don't manage this as a business — that kind of takes care of itself. We don't have salespeople. We don't have a typical management structure or go by strict job titles. That's just not us and doesn't fit our people."

So how can a company that's breaking the rules of business become such a hit?

For one, Real Art aims to stay on the edge that isn't even cut yet. For example, in the mid-'90s, Wire holed up in a crappy motel in Columbus with his computer for a week and taught himself how to create interactive media.

"Now we do more interactive media than anything else, and it has saved us during the down times," Wire said. "We're known nationally and have our largest national accounts for interactive work. There's a big demand for it, and we kind of had a head start on our competitors."

Today, Real Art increasingly is working on e-learning sites with such clients as Luxottica, which owns Cincinnati-based LensCrafters, developing sites used for the internal training of employees. It also



This rendering is an example of what Real Art's new space could look like. Real Art recently purchased a new building near Fifth Third Field in downtown Dayton, which it hopes to occupy by fall 2008. B2B Contributed artist rendering

is working on e-commerce sites with the likes of Vtech Electronics, which launched its site during the recent holiday shopping season.

"With no promotion, the launch was very successful and really exceeded our expectations. We had more than 4,000 orders within the first three weeks," said Julia Cassidy Fitzgerald, vice president of marketing for Vtech Electronics. "Real Art really thinks it all through. They bring creativity and know-how to projects, and they don't propose things that are way out of my budget."

Real Art views itself as its clients' partner, working with — not for — them. While the firm can create everything from letterhead to direct mailers, packaging to Flash-animated Web sites, it works with clients so they get the most value for their marketing and communications budget.

"Chris recognized we were going somewhere and invested his staff and his time to come up with sharp and fresh graphic standards for our initial materials," said Janet Pardue, chief marketing officer for QBase, launched a little more than two years ago. "Real Art has been just a wonderful partner for QBase. They've helped establish our corporate brand ID from our business cards to Web site."

Of course, Real Art hasn't attracted clients such as the General Motors Corp. and NCR without a lot of elbow grease.

"When you work on deadline-driven projects, you work really long hours, but

we support each other," said Betsy McFaddin, longtime Real Art employee and production manager. "I know I've always got 30 employees at my back so I know we can do it. We're problem solvers above all else. We can be fun, silly and creative but we pin it down in the end."

Wire gives employees much credit for Real Art's accomplishments. He also gives kudos to his co-owner, local attorney and businesswoman Beverly Shillito, who's served as a mentor through the years. She's helped him with such business decisions as financing the new building.

"My job has been to help him develop the skills he needs to be a full-fledged entrepreneur ... and help him keep an eye on what's best for the business," Shillito said. "Businesses have a life of their own — they have a soul — and you have to promote and develop that soul."

The soul of Real Art is in its culture, a sort of mix of professional and party animal that allows Real Art to be bold without getting too big for its britches. Indeed, Wire thinks it's crucial to be ever vigilant of the fact that the firm is only as good as its last project.

But that doesn't stop him from being full of chutzpah.

"We really get off on achieving the impossible. It makes our people really happy," Wire said. "Our mission is to rule the world of design. If we set the bar any lower than that, what's the point?"