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Nerd Alert

Sierra Bravo revels in the cred it has with techies, and amps up recruiting by emphasizing its “nerd-friendly workplace”



BIZ BRIEFING

Sierra Bravo

Headquarters: Minneapolis

Inception: 2003

Employees: 80

Revenue: \$6.4 million in 2008

Description: Web development firm

Website: www.sierra-bravo.com

Nerd Alert

Sierra Bravo revels in the cred it has with techies, and amps up recruiting by emphasizing its “nerd-friendly workplace”

BY Elizabeth Millard PHOTO BY Marshall Franklin Long

The look is familiar to anyone with a dorm room or basement apartment: a somewhat distressed but puffy leather couch, video game controllers strewn across the floor, a few empty cans of Red Bull on the side table, and a TV screen that’s only slightly smaller than a Volkswagen.

But this isn’t another Guitar Hero’s playroom, it’s the office lounge at Sierra Bravo.

The Bloomington-based firm, which specializes in web development and legacy system services, has a number of strategies for differentiating itself from competitors, including an extensive partnership program and an “overnight website challenge” that pairs volunteer programmers with nonprofits.

Its greatest advantage, though, is the stable of developers who gladly call themselves nerds, and revel in their geeky powers, notes the company’s president, Luke Bucklin.

“We define a ‘nerd’ as a highly intelligent person with an obsessive interest in a single pursuit, and that’s who we look for in our recruiting,” he says. “These are people that eat and sleep technology.”

The result of that nerd-focused recruiting drive is a staff that can craft an e-commerce Website as quickly as they can start up another round of Rock Band or rattle off lines from *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

“When you’re talking about technology, you need the talent to deliver,” says Bucklin. “We have that.”

Building a Base

Sierra Bravo got its start in 2003 when Bucklin paired up with two other technology enthusiasts, Mike Derheim and Mike Schmidt. The company’s name stems from Bucklin’s other life as a pilot. The

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—LUKE BUCKLIN, PRESIDENT AND CO-FOUNDER OF SIERRA BRAVO

call sign for “S” and “B,” for Schmidt and Bucklin, are Sierra and Bravo. Since they wanted the name to be short and catchy, Derheim graciously accepted that his own call sign code, Delta, would have to be omitted.

The trio created the business because they felt that no one in the area was doing web integration with legacy systems.

In other words, there were numerous companies with a wealth of existing equipment and applications, but no ability to create new functions to go with them. They might have information or management systems that had been great for years, but introducing e-commerce or wireless warehouse management would prove tricky. How could they mesh their current set-up with cutting-edge functionality? Sierra Bravo felt it could provide the capability.

With 15 developers, the firm began taking on more legacy work, but after only a year, the founders and director of marketing Mark Hurlburt sat down to chat about creating a more ambitious growth plan.

LEADERSHIP

Luke Bucklin, President
and co-founder

Michael Derheim,
CEO and co-founder

Michael Schmidt, Senior
Vice President of Software
Development and cofounder

LEADER PROFILE

Name: Luke Bucklin

Title: President

Age: 38

Education: High school

First job: Dishwasher

Family: Wife, Ginger;
six children: Sarah, 17,
Sami, 14, Nick and Nate,
12, Noah, 10, and Oliver, 3.

“We took a hard look at the market, and thought about how we could expand,” says Hurlburt. “We began looking at areas that seemed underserved, where we could use our technology talent.”

Growing out of its legacy niche, Sierra Bravo began offering web development, which is a much more crowded market. Services include intranet creation, graphics and interface design, multimedia development, search engine optimization, and other services. Although web development is a competitive sector, the firm has managed to distinguish itself so much that its original legacy work is now only about 20 percent of the business.

Care and Feeding

The enviable growth rate—about 600 percent from 2004 to 2007—comes in large part from that office lounge set-up, in some ways.

Creating a space for self-admitted nerds to be innovative and empowered is a huge part of what drives the company, and it’s shown in the recruiting numbers. In just three years, the number of developers has soared from 15 to 50, and they’re still aggressively interviewing. Although there’s a finite amount of talented developers in the Twin Cities, Sierra Bravo seems able to capture their attention.

A stroll through the company’s offices shows a distinct difference between the sales department and the developers. Sales and other executives are in standard-issue cubicles and offices, but the developer area is like a technology playground, complete with wide open spaces, notes written directly on the wall, and yes, the requisite action figures and movie posters of films like “Hackers.”

“Our success is a matter of making sure we’re giving developers the opportunity they need to grow and achieve what they want,” says Bucklin. “We hire people who like to learn, and if we have an environment where they can’t do that, they’ll get bored, and then they’ll leave.”

One unique attribute of the “care and feeding” of the developers is a performance measurement system that includes targets to work toward. Although such a system is standard fare in other types of companies and sales departments, developers often don’t have those types of goals; they usually just have a project to complete, and once it’s done, they move on to the next one.

“Tracking performance in this way is pretty rare in the IT field, where you don’t measure productivity except on a per-project basis,” says Bucklin. The Sierra Bravo developers have embraced the system, because it gives them a better idea of how well they’re meeting goals, and it creates larger efficiencies for the company overall.

That’s crucial, Bucklin adds, because every project is basically a new animal. Technology components need to be put together in different, fresh ways, with new digital tools, so tracking progress only by project completion wouldn’t give the company an idea of how quickly it can turn work around.

In general, the ability to move quickly and be flexible are both crucial aspects of the development work, but they’re also what keeps the company successful, Hurlburt notes.

“It seems like every year, the company has a different structure,” he says. “When I started, we had one large peer team, then we broke into smaller teams, and now those teams are larger. That’s just an example of how we try to evolve and go with the flow of the work.”

Howdy, Partner

Another major strategic advantage has been a partner program, in which the firm pairs with advertising, design, and marketing companies across the nation. Since so many marketing and ad campaigns require a technological component—from new websites to back-end database systems—many ad firms require the type of talent that resides at Sierra Bravo.

Because of its number of developers, the company is able to work very quickly, Bucklin says, and even ad firms used to irrational deadline demands have been impressed. Plus, it saves the firms from having to find local talent or hire people in-house for a project.

So far, the company has found particular success with attracting partners from large cities such as Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, and hopes to expand its network even more going forward.

The constant hiring, paired with the partnership program, has ensured fast-track growth for the company, Bucklin notes. Sierra Bravo’s revenue has gone from about \$600,000 in 2004 to \$4.1 million just three years later.

Elizabeth Millard is a regular contributor to *MinnesotaBusiness Magazine*.

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