

Reputation and persistent marketing helping interior Vancouver design firms weather recession

Industry insiders expect increase in activity in the wake of 2010 Olympic Games and the challenges of 2009



Bill Tucker, Omicron CEO, and Sally Mills, the company's interior design principal: Omicron was one of only three interior design firms that added staff in the past year

RICHARD CHU

Customer loyalty and steady work from large projects helped a few of the largest interior design firms in Vancouver maintain and expand their business during the recession last year.

Seeton Shinkewski Design Group (SSDG) was one of the few firms on *Business in Vancouver's* list of biggest interior design firms that managed to keep all their staff in the past year.

Keath Seeton, a principal at the firm, noted that his company's success in weathering the downturn was due in part to persistent marketing and the long list of loyal clientele SSDG has built up during the 30 years it's been in business.

"Seventy per cent of our work is repeat business with clients we had for a long time, which is very helpful during economic shifts of any definition."

Those clients include Cen-

tral 1 Credit Union, a wholesale provider of technological and financial services to credit unions across Canada. SSDG's office upgrade work is continuing into this year.

During the worst of the recession in the first half of 2008, the firm also benefited from work on a number of large projects, including the **CBC Vancouver** overhaul and development of the **Sparkling Hill Resort** in Vernon, which began in 2007 and is slated to open in March.

"We were very fortunate to have some very large projects on board that carried us through the past year," Seeton said.

Vancouver's Omicron was one of only three interior design firms that added staff in the past year. The increase resulted in part from the company's decision to expand its interior design team to improve its integrated building

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strategy, which brings together architects, designers, engineers and builders.

Omicron has also benefited from the growing size and scope of its interior design projects over the past couple of years. In 2008, its largest project was the 80,000-square-foot development centre for **Microsoft Canada** in Richmond.

"We're now looking at upward of five to six projects that exceed that size," said Sally Mills, Omicron's interior design principal. "So we've grown into these bigger projects."

Omicron is working on a multi-year project with **BC Hydro** to design field offices for the energy utility.

While some firms scaled back operations, Omicron ex-

panded, acquiring its Calgary office last June. The move added six staff nationally to its interior design division and provided the firm with residential design expertise.

"Our interior design staff is only 10% to 12% of our employees," said **Bill Tucker**, Omicron's CEO. "It's still got a lot of room for growth."

Part of that growth will come from its expansion into the residential design market. Tucker said the company is also looking for acquisitions to increase the size of its operations in Toronto.

But given B.C.'s relative economic strength in Can-

ada, business development is likely to increase this year. Seeton noted that much of the available design work has been in the restaurant, retail and hospitality side as tourist-based businesses update their public face in the lead-up to the Olympic Games.

But Seeton said a lot of companies will likely delay making any design decisions until the Games are over.

"After that, I think there may be pent-up demand and decisions will be made, both on the corporate side and others, and we'll see the return to business as usual." ■
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