

## **Proverb Proves the Old Adage about Giving Clients More Bang for the Buck**

By Robert Celaschi  
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Recessions can be a boon to companies able to offer more for a dollar. That idea has helped open doors for Boston-based Proverb Ltd., an agency specializing in brand strategy and design.

“We are finding ourselves in rooms that I don’t think we would have been in if the economy had been better,” said founder Daren Bascome. “Once we are in, we are able to demonstrate our capacity.”

Offering extra doesn’t mean doing a job on the cheap.

“Everyone on our team has large-agency experience, working on national and international initiatives, so we are able to deliver a lot of expertise in a very efficient package,” Bascome said.

When MFS Investment Management commissioned Proverb to do a corporate history display for its executive offices, the company had two concerns at first: that Proverb hadn’t worked for such a large client, and that Proverb’s style might prove too edgy for an 85-year-old financial firm.

“We were a little nervous that they were going to go hog-wild,” said Rick Kampersal, vice president of communications. But he called the results “phenomenal.”

“The greatest compliment that I’ve gotten is that it looks like it has always been there,” Kampersal said.

The extra value included a mock-up very early in the process so MFS executives could see what they’d be getting, and to continually refine the design.

“They aren’t content to sit there and let one design work. They want to keep working with it,” Kampersal said.

Proverb’s services range from \$100 to \$250 an hour when the company bills hourly. Bascome said the company often will try to package its work for a fixed fee and offer financial incentives for hitting specific benchmarks. With five full-time and four part-time employees, Proverb is on pace to



hit \$750,000 in revenue this year, up from \$320,000 last year. The big jump had a long ramp-up however, going back to 1997. That's when Bascome started out as a freelancer.

"Even as a freelance graphic designer there was always a tendency to bring in additional services, a more holistic approach to the work I was doing," Bascome said. He'd bring in expertise as the brand identities he designed would be translated into corporate signs or Web pages.

But that arrangement had its drawbacks. One was not being able to plan ahead as much as he wanted.

"You get something in, you try to do an exceptional job, and then move on to the next thing," he said. "You are almost always tied to executing, as opposed to being strategic."

In 2004, he gave the process more structure by establishing Proverb as a corporation with employees. After several years, though, he still felt the need for better organizational and planning skills.

He got that extra kick from program called StreetWise MBA, run by **InnerCity Entrepreneurs** in Boston. The nine-month certificate program is designed specifically for urban small businesses and is taught by adjunct faculty members from local business schools. As part of the program, each entrepreneur develops a three-year growth plan. Bascome completed his earlier this year.

"Basically you use your business as a case study for a lot of what you would cover in an MBA," Bascome said.

Now Bascome is considering additional hires, such as account managers or people with business development experience. And he's working on pricing.

"We need to develop a pricing model that is based more on impact rather than hours," he said.

While he's looking to position Proverb as a good fit for larger organizations, small clients are still valuable because they can lead to bigger deals.

The 30-room Hotel Veritas, slated to open early next year in Cambridge, already had hired a graphic designer to create a logo, but the results weren't as great as the owner had hoped.

"We decided to hit the reset button, and that's when I brought Daren into the picture," said Benson Willis, the hotel's general manager. Because Proverb is a branding company, not just a graphic design firm, "they do far beyond the basic logo," he said.

Pleased with the results, Willis has been touting Proverb to other firms.

Roxbury Technology Corp. originally hired Proverb in 2006 to design its offices. CEO Beth Williams then brought Proverb back the next year to do a new branding campaign for the company, which takes an environmentally friendly approach to remanufactured toner cartridges. Last year Proverb also overhauled the Roxbury Technology Web site.