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Fast 50 Diary

Fast 50 Diary firms have new products, contracts and procedures for New Year growth

Premium content from Minneapolis / St. Paul Business Journal - by Jim Hammerand , Staff writer

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Five of the Twin Cities' fastest-growing private companies are chugging toward a new quarter with new budgets, new contracts and new products, all detailed in this month's Fast 50 Diary.

Black Design Inc.

Black Design Inc. CEO **Tina Wilcox** said the office feels a bit like Santa's workshop these days after the retail brand agency developed three gift lines in November.

"We've been doing product development for other people for 30 years. We've had a lot of successes, and we feel like it's time to dip our toe in the water," she said. "Every day somebody comes up with something else. It's kind of gone crazy."

The Minneapolis office is developing three gift lines for the 2011 holiday season. The products, to be ultimately marketed under the Black brand, are in various stages of development or beyond prototyping, with Black waiting on pricing and manufacturing proposals.

The firm is testing the shelf appeal of three card-game lines — a collaboration with an undisclosed partner — at limited stores during this holiday gift season. Wilcox expects to see results in the coming weeks, and Black will negotiate with distributors and retailers for a wide-scale release if shoppers bite hard.

Another gift product is a line of unconventional charm jewelry "based on people's phobias" that would let wearers put their fears on display, Wilcox said. The bracelet and necklaces could be mixed and matched with unsettling charms, in shapes such as a snarling dog or crashing airplane.

"We've shown it to a number of people and they've just gone crazy about it," Wilcox said.

Black is searching for a manufacturer for the 60-piece jewelry line and expects factory samples to come back as soon as March.

Black also is taking bids from Chinese manufacturers for a line of desk accessories, with proposals expected in January.

The gift lines are on track to go into production this spring, Wilcox said.

Innovative Office Solutions

[Innovative Office Solutions](#) locked down its Minnesota government office-supply contract in November, renewing the multimillion-dollar agreement with all state agencies through August 2014, CEO **Jennifer Smith** said.

Innovative also won an annual contract worth about \$500,000 in sales and is waiting to hear on two other major contracts, all of which would begin in January.

New furniture projects raked in \$525,000, primarily from public-sector and retail-mortgage customers. Smith still points to furniture sales as an indicator of economic growth across several industries.

"It's not one fluke thing," she said.

Revenue in November, at nearly \$2.8 million, beat the month's goal by 6 percent and November 2009 sales by 51 percent, Smith said. Sales from January through November were trending 67 percent over the same period last year, she said.

Smith wants to hire another driver, bringing the fleet to eight drivers and trucks, to service downtown Minneapolis customers. Innovative now makes 60 downtown stops in an average day, Smith said, but an additional driver would allow more efficient routes across the entire service area.

[Amcom Software Inc.](#)

Amcom Software Inc. in early December released version 2.1 of its Mobile Connect messaging application, a smart-phone program that replaces emergency pagers.

The product has been on the market since April and is in 17 hospitals (none in Minnesota), CEO **Chris Heim** said. The software package sends encrypted critical alerts over cellular networks or wireless Internet connections to doctors' smart phones. The alerts will still sound even if the phones are silenced, and can send receipt and read confirmations back to the sender.

"The problem with pagers is they go out and you assume they've been received. ... When you're dealing with life-and-death situations, you want that audit trail," Heim said.

Developers are working on the next upgrade, scheduled to come out in the first quarter of 2011.

"We're on a really aggressive schedule on this," Heim said. "It is one of the major focuses of the business."

BERG Professional Staffing

November revenue at BERG Professional Staffing was \$162,000, down about 18 percent from \$197,000 in the same month last year, President **Jeremy Berg** said.

He said the number of placed workers didn't drop, but that some high-level projects came to an end as new ones started. That didn't cause a head count change, but payments decreased because the new projects are staffed by workers at lower levels who don't command the same premium.

The firm is finalizing a budget for 2011, and Berg said one of the biggest lessons from 2010 was the importance of planning and preparedness.

"We're just making sure a lot of pieces are in place internally" before business picks up in the first quarter, he said.

One business cost that caught Berg off guard was that of increasing insurance coverage.

"The bigger we grow, the larger clients we work with, the more insurance they expect us to have," Berg said, later admitting that there are worse problems to have.

Critical Care Services Inc.

Critical Care Services Inc., which does business as Life Link III, conducted 1,987 medical transports in November, CEO Carter McComb said.

Ground transports, with 1,842, came in at around 15 percent above budget, but air transports — 131 by helicopter and 15 by fixed-wing aircraft — fell short of budget by about 12 percent, he said. Net operating income for the month was 47 percent ahead of budget.

In the first 11 months of 2010, volume was 2.5 percent ahead of budget and net operating income 6.5 percent ahead of budget, McComb said. Compared to the same period in 2009, net operating income was up by 145 percent.

For the first time, the company is using a monthly quality index to track patient care, Critical Care Director of Quality and Education Cheryl Pasquarella said.

The index is calculated by measuring service indicators such as time on ground, adverse occurrences and complicated medical procedures, she said. The company will also implement a formal feedback channel in January and wants to improve interactions between employees and their hospital or emergency service customers.

"We can tweak some things that happen in that 20 minutes or 15 minutes at the scene, but we don't want to extend those times," she said.

McComb said the initiative was "long overdue" and will build customer relationships.

"Every time we do it right — really, really right — they'll call us again, and every time they call us again, it's additional volume," he said.

Fast 50 Diary Companies
BERG Professional Staffing (No. 7)
President: Jeremy Berg
2009 Revenue: \$2.83 million
(up \$214,875 from 2008)
Web: bergstaffing.com

Amcom Software Inc. (No. 13)
CEO: Chris Heim
2009 Revenue: \$46.1 million
(up \$12.43 million from 2008)
Web: amcomsoftware.com

Black Design Inc. (No. 16)
CEO: Tina Wilcox
2009 Revenue: \$3.56 million
(up \$1.7 million from 2008)
Web: blackretail.us

Critical Care Services Inc. (No. 30)
CEO: Carter McComb
2009 Revenue: \$28.63 million
(up \$5.76 million from 2008)
Web: lifelinkiii.com

Innovative Office Solutions (No. 38)
CEO: Jennifer Smith
2009 Revenue: \$19.9 million
(up \$3.66 million from 2008)
Web: innovativeos.com

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