

'Dashboard' helps drive toward growth

Plan gives goals and objectives for company, workers

By RUTH BAUM BIGUS
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The company: Epic Entertainment Inc. Epic works with companies and organizations in event planning, creating memorable productions to communicate a client's message. Using entertainment as a vehicle for communication, Epic produces events for sales meetings, product launches and training sessions. Clients include **Bayer Animal Health**, the **Midwest Center for Holocaust Education** and the **Kansas City Boys & Girls Club**.

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Ownership, top management: Epic Entertainment is a wholly owned subsidiary of **Starlight Theatre Association Inc.** Although Starlight is a nonprofit organization, Epic is a for-profit venture. Bob Rolff is Epic's president; Bill Hartnett is chief operating officer; Donna Thomason is entertainment producer; and Laura Criss is event producer.

Number of employees: Seven.

Challenge: How to operate effectively as a for-profit company. **Background, research:** Starlight Theatre Association, a nonprofit theatrical organization in Kansas City that produces Broadway-style musicals, got into corporate entertainment in 1995. The business grew rapidly.

"We became too large to be under Starlight and unrelated to the core business of Starlight," said Hartnett. "We needed to spin it off."

In 2002, Epic Entertainment was launched as a separate for-profit entity and quickly faced new challenges.

"Standing on its own is a much different environment," Hartnett said. "We had to find ways to grow the business and make it self-sufficient. We needed to focus on what our business was - producing for the corporate client."

Action steps: Hartnett does a lot of reading, and that's where he got an idea on how to move Epic forward.

"Most of the people who found success (in business) did it by seeking out advice and networking with those who have been successful," he said.



JENNIFER HACK/The Kansas City Star

Margaret Reynolds is a consultant working with Epic Entertainment Chief Operating Officer Bill Hartnett on a plan for growth of the Starlight subsidiary.

His research led Hartnett to the **Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentoring Program**, which matches entrepreneurs to veteran business people as mentors. Hartnett was accepted into the three-year program and matched with Margaret Reynolds, whose strategic planning and marketing firm, **Reynolds Consulting**, focuses on creating value through growth.

"What he needed was plan for growth, and that's what I do," Reynolds said.

Reynolds focused on getting Epic's operations to match a strategic plan that would be developed.

"We took a step back to work on two things - what the company does best and defining how they are different or better from their competitors," she said.

Reynolds and Hartnett came up with a slogan - "memorable event development company" - to describe Epic. From there, Reynolds helped Epic map out a "dashboard," the basis for formulation of a strategic plan.

"It is a system providing feedback and information about performance and provides feedback on activities and behaviors both internally and externally," Reynolds said. By following the dashboard, Reynolds said, a company has

guidance on day-to-day operations "and looking at how people spend their time compared to what they're trying to achieve with a strategic plan."

The dashboard states goals and measurements for the company as well as specific objectives for employees.

Hartnett and Reynolds set two goals for Epic: team effectiveness and creating market awareness. Team effectiveness would be measured in several ways including client surveys. Each employee would also be measured on an "Add Two Like You" effort, a tactic designed to find key people who could join Epic and enhance its growth. Employees would also be encouraged to take all vacation time earned to avoid burnout.

Creating market awareness involved enhancing networking opportunities by having employees join two professional and two civic organizations.

"This way, you find connections you don't know of," Hartnett said. Epic also set a goal of retaining 70 percent of its current clients and adding 20 new clients.

The dashboard was put together over the course of two months and put into writing with a graphic depiction. Employees we asked to challenge it and give comments and ideas. Hartnett said the staff meets once a week to review the dashboard, making sure the company is driving in the right direction. He also has individual meetings with employees to focus on their personal goals.

Results: Since putting the dashboard concept into place a few months ago, Hartnett said, he has seen a strategic shift in the firm.

"We are generating more proposals," Hartnett said. Last year, Epic staff called on 10 new clients; so far this year the firm had contacted 50 potential clients with two coming in as new business.

"When we call on a client, it's enabled us to be very specific about what we do," he said.

The dashboard concept has proved helpful to employees, too, Hartnett said.

"It's given people a better sense of what their roles are and how it all fits into our overall goals," he said.

Creating the dashboard has become the framework for Epic's strategic planning process overall. It has also freed up Hartnett from day-to-day details, allowing him to focus on the overall direction of the company.