

ONE 2 WATCH

Editor's note: The "One to Watch" award was created in 2007 to highlight a business having a significant impact on the Arkansas economy. The award recognizes and honors a company or operation in our state that shows significant promise to positively change the state's business landscape. Five to 10 years from now, could this company transform our state economy or have an even larger impact on jobs, infrastructure and business influence? If so, how? These are the guidelines that the panel of Talk Business contributors considered when making our selection. This year's winner:

Rockfish Interactive.

The lobby of Rockfish Interactive in Rogers, Arkansas.



Rockfish
INTERACTIVE

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB OCKEN

Say the name: **Rockfish Interactive**. Ring any bells?

You might be shaking your head, but the list of those who have heard of – and employed – this Rogers-based digital agency is impressive and growing: Walmart, J.B. Hunt, Tyson Foods, Johnson & Johnson, the *Twilight* marketing colossus.

Then there's *Advertising Age*, which recently tapped Rockfish as its Small Agency of the Year, among other honors it has garnered.

Plus, they sell coffee. But more on that anon.

Led by founder and CEO Kenny Tomlin, who is merely 37, Rockfish Interactive has

established itself as a major player in web applications, social networking, and customer interactivity. Plus it's become an incubator, creating subsidiary businesses and developing proprietary technology it licenses to clients.

Not bad for a northwest Arkansas company that's just four years old.

It's easy for Tomlin to explain the central idea behind Rockfish: High tech. Rockfish

was founded on the idea of building brand experiences and platforms for customers to interact with.

"We wanted to be a very technology-driven business," he said. "A lot of agencies we dealt with were spun out of marketing companies, so they were very campaign-driven."

The entrepreneurial side of Rockfish was critical, as well, and to date the company has launched seven new brands and licensed

Previous Talk Business "One to Watch" Winners:
2007 – Baldor Electric
2008 – Dassault Falcon Jet
2009 – Argenta Development Group

eight proprietary technologies.

"Technology and marketing are mixed these days," he said. "We launch companies that use the skill sets we have in-house. We think being entrepreneurial sharpens our team and people in a way a regular agency can't do."

And as he told *Advertising Age* in the article announcing the Small Agency of the Year honor, those spin-offs and licensed technologies provide Rockfish with an additional revenue stream that isn't subject to the whims of their marketing clients, providing additional stability for the company.

Not to mention greater growth.

Rockfish wasn't Tomlin's first job, or even his first company. After graduating from Southwest Baptist University in Missouri with a degree in political science and communications, he started out working in marketing and quickly saw the value of learning web development skills. He learned by doing, teaching himself on the most widely used software programs, and eventually started his own web development business, iSoft, in Dallas.

One of his products there was an e-commerce site called CustomGolf.com; it was successful enough that he sold it and iSoft in 1999. After a year with the new company, he moved to northwest Arkansas, where he had family, and he signed on with Walmart to help develop their e-commerce strategy.

After more than four years with Walmart he departed with the intention of starting a digital agency – though not necessarily in northwest Arkansas, he said. About that time he met Steve Clark (not the former attorney general), and the two became business partners. After a year of running a traditional agency in Fort Smith, they shut it down and decided to open Rockfish.

"In January of '06 we said 'let's start the business,'" Tomlin recalled. "I remember my first days were literally spent working in the San Francisco Bread Company – literally a laptop and a dream. And we put together the strategy for Rockfish."

As for the company name, Tomlin said it's an homage to another eatery of fond memory.

"I wanted to name the company something that would be remarkable, have energy to it,"

he said, adding that he rejected naming the Tomlin Agency or the like because he wanted it to be "about a team, not myself."

Then one day he remembered having eaten at the Rockfish Grill in Dallas and thought to himself, "I'm just going to call it Rockfish Interactive."

"Frankly," he offers, somewhat chagrined, "I should've come up with a much better idea than that."

But as it turns out, the name he chose is catchy and stands out, much like the agency he's built under that banner. And it didn't take long for Rockfish to start signing some high-profile clients.

"In our first year we worked with Walmart, Tyson, J.B. Hunt," said Tomlin.

Rockfish Interactive's first project for Walmart was revamping WalmartStores.com, its corporate website and front door to the world. That project went so well, said Suraya Bliss, Walmart's senior director of corporate communications, Rockfish was tapped for another major effort: Finding a way to keep all of Walmart's 1.4 million U.S. employees in touch with the company and up-to-date on what's happening there.

The result is MyWalmart.com, a social networking site that now has 700,000 employees registered as users and was named one of the 10 best intranets in the world by research firm Nielsen Norman Group.

"They helped take our vision and build it into fruition," said Bliss.

MyWalmart.com allows the company to reach hundreds of thousands of employees when they need to distribute information. But it's far more than a glorified bulletin board: The site's social networking function allows those employees to create public profiles (150,000 have so far) and keep in touch with each other, sharing ideas and information about their stores, their jobs, and what they think can be done to improve them.

"You know, Facebook is big, social networking is big," Bliss said. "And how

people are willing to accept information, their expectations are changing. We wanted to meet and exceed their expectations and let associates connect with one another on the site."

And Rockfish enabled them to do just that.



Rockfish Interactive CEO Kenny Tomlin

Because of the company's strong skill base, and its long-term relationship with Walmart and its Information Services Division (the in-house IT department), Bliss said everything went smoothly.

"They've been really fun to work with," said Bliss. "Kenny and I worked very closely, from the beginning of the vision for the site all the way to I just met with him last week on things. He gets really excited about working on cool, fun projects for our company, so it's been nice."



While the retailer doesn't have any new projects it has turned to Rockfish for development, she said the firm will continue to be active with Walmart as both the WalmartStores.com and MyWalmart.com sites mature, to meet any changing needs.

"We've been really happy with [My-Walmart.com] and WalmartStores.com, so we're going to continue to build and strengthen the sites we have and make them even more valuable for our users and the company," said Bliss.

While it seems a no-brainer that having

Fortune 500 companies on your client list is going to be good for your agency, especially at the bottom line, Tomlin says there was another very important impact of serving industry leaders, with their high expectations.

"When you work with great companies they really stretch you," he explained, "force you to grow sometimes."

"Grow" might be an understatement. Starting out as a one-man show, Rockfish soon had seven employees and occupied an 800-square-foot office on Dickson Street

in Fayetteville. By the time they moved to Bentonville, it had doubled in size to 15.

A year ago they moved to their fourth location – the entire second floor of an office building in Rogers – with 25 employees, but have already outgrown that space. Today there are 80 total employees (including eight in their Dallas office), but Tomlin says they're hiring so frequently that the number "changes on an almost daily basis."

And just whom are they hiring? Programmers. Designers. Graphic artists. Account reps. But most importantly to



Staff meetings are high energy, interactive, and on Fridays, involve food.

Tomlin, they're assembling "a unique group of people" – workers who can embrace the dynamic of a small agency with big ideas and bigger clients.

All of that is happening in an atmosphere that's both intense and laid back. Step out of the elevators into Rockfish Interactive's headquarters and you're greeted by bold, bright colors, stylish furnishings and modern appointments. Credit for the look and feel of the space goes to Tomlin's wife, Dana.

"She's our cultural architect. She's responsible for the vibe," he says with poorly concealed pride.

Dana created the look and feel of the office space, for example, and has carried on a tradition from the earliest days of cooking lunch for the employees every Friday in the on-site kitchen.

That's right. Lunch. For more than 70 people. Every week.

That alone says a great deal about the atmosphere at Rockfish – more family than button-down corporate. The kitchen is located in a break room with overstuffed furniture and flat screen TVs, and there are videogames for employees to play. Next door to it is the coffee bar, and we're not talking about a credenza with a couple of big metal urns on it. No sir, it's an honest-to-goodness Silver Joe's coffee shop, which is manned by an honest-to-goodness barista every morning who makes sure the employees are good and wired on all the caffeine they want.

And this is where the coffee sales come in. Silver Joe's is another one of Rockfish's brands, a line of specialty coffee launched in 2005. Now it has stores in both the U.S. and Japan, including one recently opened in Rogers. There's even an iPhone app to help you find the nearest one. All of this is another example of Tomlin's philosophy of diversification.

Its other ventures include several web-based services. They include TidyTweets.com, which helps companies clean up the language on their Twitter feeds, as well as avoiding spam and barring unruly Tweeters; FileSend.com, which allows companies to securely transfer files too large for e-mail; and Genofish.com, a corporate training tool that overcomes typical hurdles such as distance and scheduling.

That ongoing innovation and

entrepreneurship continue to garner attention for Rockfish. In addition to naming them the best small agency, *Advertising Age* placed Rockfish Interactive in their 2009 A-list, which recognizes the top 10 agencies in the world. And they were a finalist for *Ad Week's* small agency of the decade.

As for the company's next step, Tomlin says they're already growing outside of northwest Arkansas, in markets like New York, Washington, D.C., and the West Coast, as well as their existing Dallas office.

"I think that's what we'll see in 2010 – a lot of growth in Dallas, where we have great leadership and great clients," he said.

At the same time, he says there's not some arbitrary "number goal" he's trying to

reach in terms of employees or revenue because it would look good on paper.

"We're not trying to grow because it's cool," he said. "Healthy things grow. It's energy and excitement. Clients like it when you're exciting to be around."

But with new launches already planned from their entrepreneurial labs – including a joint venture with ESPN commentator Chris Mortensen on a website to help young football players move from the high school to college level – Tomlin is confident the company will continue to expand ... and continue to outgrow its office spaces.

"When we look ahead," he said assuredly, "we think Rockfish [will be] a company that employs thousands of people through our company and the companies we own." **TBQ**



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