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STEVE MORASSETTE

Robert Fiveash (above) and Danny Rosin recently opened a downtown Norfolk office for the specialty advertising and promotion company they launched in Raleigh six years ago. "Being in the heart of downtown . . . has been fantastic," said Fiveash.

Promotional fuel for Norfolk

Natives decide to expand their business back home

By LAURA LAING

Thinkets and trash. Swag. Tchotchkes.

Most folks have a draw full of pens, notepads, coffee mugs and golf tees. It's the stuff given away at trade shows or left behind at client meetings.

But for Robert Fiveash and his business partner Danny Rosin, swag (short for "stuff we all get") is serious business. They own Brand Fuel Promotions, a six-year-old specialty advertising and promotion company based in Raleigh, N.C. Fiveash recently opened a second office in downtown Norfolk.

"The specialty advertising industry has always kind of been the red-headed stepchild of advertising," Fiveash said.

Fiveash and Rosin's plan was to elevate service and make swag cool.

The two met in high school and graduated from Norfolk Academy in the mid-1980s. After completing a degree from Hampden-Sydney, Fiveash went on to a career as a stockbroker for A.G. Edwards and Sons in Norfolk. He got his MBA from the College of William and Mary in 1998. After graduating from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Rosin stuck around the Research Triangle, getting to know the screen-printing business.

When Fiveash heard that Rosin was looking for business advice, his ears perked up.

"I started thinking, 'It could be fabulous to work with one of your best friends,'" he said.

He researched the specialty advertising industry and developed this opinion: Many com-

panies are in the business but none do it consistently well.

"There were plenty of people out there serving the market, but none were servicing the market," Fiveash said. "There really was an opportunity."

He had found a niche.

Few customers are particularly loyal to promotional items companies, he said. Because the industry is based on distribution from a wide variety of suppliers, many things could potentially go wrong with an order.

"We are dependent on the suppliers to do the right thing," Fiveash said.

At the same time, companies depend on promotional items to help with branding, so the details – like logo color or fabric weight – are pretty important. Brand Fuel Promotions was a carefully selected name – one that Fiveash and Rosin hope emphasizes their commitment to image.

They figured that two things would set them off from the pack: creativity and follow-through. Unlike other companies that outsource creative work, Brand Fuel has an in-house art and graphics department.

"People want to work with creative types," Fiveash said. "We're in the business to be creative."

Follow-through required resources – the ability to eat the cost if an order is not right.

"Things will go wrong," Fiveash said. "It's how we fix the things once they go wrong that makes a difference. I think a lot of folks are surprised by that and really appreciate that."

When Fiveash and Rosin were ready to launch the company, downtown Norfolk wasn't ready for them.

"We started it in Raleigh because we felt the business environment was much more vibrant," Fiveash said. "It seemed like the ideal place to start a business. And it was."

The company has experienced great success, growing from two employees to 22 and working with clients like Legg Mason, KPMG, KFC, Webber Grills and Operation Smile.

"We will do a little over \$5 million in sales this year," Fiveash said. That's about \$800,000 more than last year.

But all the while, they kept an eye on Hampton Roads – downtown Norfolk especially.

"We've always had the idea that if Norfolk was a good market for us, we should be here. It's home," Fiveash said.

Last fall, the plan to come home fell into place. Fiveash moved back to the area and began laying the foundation for a Norfolk presence. In March, Brand Fuel opened an office and showroom on Plume Street.

Fiveash said downtown Norfolk is showing characteristics of the Research Triangle – a vibrant business community that is attracting big players like Trader Publishing, which this summer announced plans to erect an office building in the area.

As marketing and sales development manager for Trader Electronic Media, Paige Reyna buys lots of swag – T-shirts for clients and employees and giveaways for tradeshow. She's been working with Brand Fuel for more than two

years.

"It's great to have him in the area," she said. Before the move, Fiveash shipped samples to her.

"But now I can just go [to the showroom] on my lunch break," she said.

Fiveash considered moving to Chesapeake. "But we wanted to be in the thick of it," he said. "We wanted to add excitement to this business."

And downtown Norfolk provides that, he said. His office and showroom hums – the walls are painted the same bright red and yellow featured on the Brand Fuel logo and a huge rocket ship full of fat gumballs lures visitors as they step off the elevator. Framed in Fiveash's office window is a striking view of the Battleship Wisconsin.

But a funky feel isn't the only way to make the business work. Responsiveness and professionalism are still the name of the game.

"If we lose any of those things, we'd look like the other guys out there," Fiveash said.

Reyna is confident in the company's ability to deliver.

"His customer service – it's unsurpassed," she said.

Fiveash is hiring a sales assistant for the Norfolk office and will soon be in the market for a larger sales force. About 10 people would be the right size staff, he said.

In the meantime, he's convinced they made the right decision to come home to Norfolk.

"Being in heart of downtown, right here on the corner of Plume and Granby, has been fantastic."