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## [ALUMNI ASSOCIATION NEWS]

### Robert Fiveash M.B.A. '98: Building a business with the proper fuel

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Robert Fiveash M.B.A. '98 has built a company that surged to the top and is looking down at its 22,000 competitors. And it's still growing. *Brand Fuel* rocketed above the fray of the promotional advertising business. What is interesting, is that Fiveash and his partner started the company the same year he got his degree from William and Mary. Incredibly well-timed results or a coincidence? Read his tale and decide for yourself...



#### Tell us a little bit about your company, and your role with the company as co-owner and president.

Brand Fuel is a promotional advertising firm -- we provide branded/logged products for client events, online stores, product launches, tradeshow, and internal and external incentives. In the 10 years we've been in business, we've risen to the top 3 percent of the industry in terms of sales. Our 32 employees work from offices in Norfolk, Va. and Raleigh, N.C. Our fulfillment warehouse and offices, which operate online stores for the likes of Red Hat, SAS, and Dominion Enterprises, are located in Morrisville, N.C. My role has changed over the years, from strictly operations early on to sales several years ago to general management / strategy / business development today. I think this is fairly typical for a small business -- you wear many different hats, and those hats can and will change over time.

#### I understand that the story of how your company came into being is quite interesting.

Well, my partner and I were both at transition periods in our lives in 1998. I was close to graduating with my W&M M.B.A. and he was leaving a screenprinting company in Chapel Hill that he had essentially outgrown -- having helped turn it into the Triangle's premiere screenprinting operation. Danny (Rosin) and I grew up together, and were inseparable friends as teenagers so we always threw ideas off of each other as we worked our way through our own versions of the corporate world. When he sought my advice regarding his transition, several "what if?" light bulbs went off in my head. What if we tried something together, combining our different skill sets? We both certainly had/have the entrepreneurial energy to give it a real try. Would we be putting our friendship at risk, given the dismal long-term success rate of new businesses? That was probably my biggest fear. And, finally, what would we do?

We were both interested in marketing and advertising. And Danny had an extensive background in screenprinting and corporate-branded apparel in general. We asked ourselves what part of the marketing/advertising industries had the lowest barriers to entry, the weakest competitors, and nearly nonexistent use of technology?

The answer was promotional advertising, typically seen 10 years ago as the red-headed stepchild of the industry. We figured that if we could concentrate on what large corporate clients needed (an advocate, consultant, and expert versus another salesperson trying to close a sale), and do it with professionalism, integrity, energy, and creativity, we could quickly become the go-to supplier to those companies looking for an alternative to the mom-and-pops they'd been forced to use. Surely the likes of Sentara Healthcare and Norfolk Southern, both now clients, were looking for a better solution.

Ten years later, we are very happy with where we stand in the industry and the part we have played in elevating the status of promotional advertising. By concentrating on quality merchandise, superior customer service, and using technology to make our clients' experience more satisfying, we continue to push the view of the "trinkets peddler" further and further into the past.

#### The company has been around since 1998, and you've already become a leader in your market. What kinds of steps did you take to grow the company so quickly? Was the quick growth part of the business plan?

I think the key was that we found a market need and filled it. Until recently, large corporations who wanted branded gear (hats, polos, padfolios, mugs, pens, awards, etc.) had only small mom-and-pops to rely on. These companies did the best they could, but simply did not have the resources to adequately provide for Fortune 500 companies. Brand Fuel, while still a relatively small company, sits close to the top of a group of 22,000 competitors nationally -- we have the buying power and commitment to customer service that large corporate clients demand. By aligning our capabilities with the needs of these large corporate clients, we quickly provided something that did not exist before.

**It looks like your employees are permitted to have some fun on the job; not exactly the stereotypical business**

**atmosphere. How would you describe their work environment, and has this difference helped you gain an edge on the competition?**

The work environment is a plus, certainly. Our monthly wellness events, tradeshow, and annual rocket day parties allow folks to let off steam and interact with each other (and clients) in a more relaxed atmosphere. But that is not to say that we don't work just as hard -- and produce more -- than a similar group in the more traditional workplace. I think we do both.

**How has Norfolk treated your company -- some people say that in order to move a company to the "A" leagues, you need to be in an "A" city like New York or Boston, but you have accomplished that without leaving your roots.**

Norfolk has treated Brand Fuel well. While we started the company in 1998 in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina, we always planned on having a presence in Norfolk when the timing was right. Both my partner and I grew up in Hampton Roads and we both spent 12 years at Norfolk Academy. With the number of contacts we already had in the area having grown up here, it was a no-brainer. And when downtown Norfolk really took off five to seven years ago or so, we jumped at the chance to establish a strong presence here. Another plus is that for some clients, it is irrelevant where Brand Fuel is located. Using expedited shipping and the latest proofing technology, our clients feel in close proximity to us even if we are across the country. While most of our customers are in the Southeast, our presence outside of this region grows every year.

**What are some long-term goals for Brand Fuel?**

I would say our primary long-term goal is to become as much a technology company as a sales company. Our industry is not known to be technologically-savvy, so any increase in the effective use of technology will allow us to move past competitors and attract clients who share our belief that technology, when properly implemented, can increase efficiency and profits for both the client and Brand Fuel. We've also been working hard laying the groundwork for several exciting new sales channels that we believe will greatly expand our reach in the coming years.

**Tell us a little bit about your W&M experience.**

What impressed me the most about W&M was the small class size and access to faculty. My experience would not have been nearly as rewarding had there been a chance of being lost in the shuffle.

**Did your W&M M.B.A. help you get Brand Fuel going -- you graduated from the College and started the company on the same year.**

I think the most important thing my William and Mary M.B.A. gave me was confidence. I was not afraid to start the business because I felt I had been prepared by the program to handle most of what I anticipated I might face. Certainly there were surprises and issues/challenges that I did not study in the classroom, but I feel my W&M experience allowed me to confront these head on and without much trepidation.

**What are some of the ways that you like to spend your free time?**

Most free time is spent with wife, Amy, and daughters Grayson and Anne Burns (five- and three-years-old). We like to ski together in the winter and I enjoy canoeing and running when it's warmer. A good friend of mine and I head out to the mountains and rivers of West Virginia or North Carolina every year to get in our annual river trip. We've done it every year since 1993 and it is something that we both look forward to. My wife and I also enjoy playing tennis together.