

Marketplace

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL SUNDAY



Photos by Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

From left, Ceonex CEO Theodore Agranat and employees Paul Ermolovich, David Kiley, Eireann Kiley and Rick Goudey at the company's offices in North Adams. Ceonex plan to add two more staff members.

A dot-com survivor

Web design firm in North Adams adds clients, staff

By Christopher Marcisz
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NORTH ADAMS — Walking into the offices of Ceonex in the Beaver Mill on Route 8 seems like stepping back in time to the dot-com heyday of the late 1990s.

From the nonhierarchical office arrangement, to the large whiteboard covered with cryptic flow charts, to the blue ping-pong table by the windows, the firm has the appearance of a Silicon Valley workspace.

While many companies in the Web design and consulting sector — names like Razorfish and Sapient — were hit hard by the dot-com bust, Ceonex has seen its client base triple in the past year, and plans to add another two jobs to the five it already has in North Adams.

"As far as the dot-com bust, we really didn't notice," declared Ceonex CEO Theodore Agranat.

According to Agranat, the key to growth has been to avoid the siren song of public offerings, venture capital and haughty client relationships and to focus on close personal attention and loyalty to clients large and small.

"I'm hands-on on every major project in one way or another," he said. "It makes our corporate culture very different."

The child of Russian émigrés, Agranat, 27, was raised in Austria. When he was younger,



Since Ceonex created a new Web site for Berkshire Life Insurance, traffic has more than doubled and the company's sales leads have doubled.

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he did a lot of freelance work translating Russian music and television productions into German, a process that taught him "the concept of focusing on small details."

He eventually moved to the United States, and became interested in computers when he discovered Photoshop 2.0, an early visual media software program. Photoshop opened

him up to the possibility of how computers "level the playing field."

Agranat and partner Vadim Gafarov founded Ceonex in 1998 in Lynn, and moved it to North Adams in 2000. Gafarov, the company's chief operating officer, works from Los Angeles.

Ceonex reports employing about 40 people, based in offices around the country and in Russia, Austria, Australia, Canada, the Dominican Republic and soon in Japan. Five employees work in the headquarters office at the Beaver Mill.

The company offers a range of "scalable," or growth-capable, technology solutions for its clients as well as design and market research capability. It has a subsidiary — PixelBrick — which focuses on "entry-level" design, mostly building Web sites without extensive market research.

Ceonex staffers concentrate not just on creating a better Web presence for their clients, but on audiences and strategies that they themselves might have overlooked. That requires a level of personal interaction and developing projects in phases.

"We like to partner with companies over time," said Ceonex's senior sales consultant, Rick Goudey. "Grabbing a small piece and running is not building a relationship."

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WEB from D1

The company's clients run the gamut, including Web-hosting companies such as Lunarpages in La Mirada, Calif., and Hostrocket in Clifton Park, N.Y. Local clients include Frog Lotus Yoga studio, located across the hall at Beaver Mill.

"We pitch to small guys to take on the big guys," Agranat said.

One of the firm's recent, major

clients is Berkshire Life Insurance Co. of America. The finalist in a vendor search that spanned New England, Ceonex created the insurer's new Web site — www.theberkshire.com — which was introduced last October.

Sales leads double

According to Berkshire Life, traffic on the new Web site has more than doubled, as have sales leads. (Ceonex also notes that the increased traffic makes the site more recognizable to common search engines.)

"The critical thing with [Agranat] is that he can just instinctively marry the needs of technology with the needs of business," said John Broderick, Berkshire Life's creative director. "That was one of

the intangible aspects we were looking for."

The five-month project involved defining the goals for the Web site and letting Ceonex fashion a solution. Broderick said the insurance company wanted to expand and grow its Web presence in a specific fashion.

"A lot of our competition were building what I call Web site malls, giant Web sites that do everything," he said. "We don't want to do everything."

Targeting an audience

The aim was to create a "marketing Web site. We needed to target a specific audience for a specific reason," he said.

Broderick gave Ceonex high marks for both the process of

developing the Web site and the resulting product.

"They were on time, on budget, and delivered what they promised," he said. "...From beginning to end the process was all positive. They've been a wonderful discovery and a great opportunity for both of us."

Agranat, who lives in Clarksburg, said the company is committed to Berkshire County. He noted the tremendous availability of space here — Ceonex is considering adding a hardware services division — and the growing tech community that fosters cooperation.

"It's a tremendously good place to be," he said.

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