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FEATURE

Partnership Combines Individual Fingerprint, Unique Imprint

Series by Helen Graves

Partnership, it turns out in our focus series this month, is as individual as a fingerprint.

Elinor Selame, president and CEO of BrandEquity International, supports her husband's creative branding work with her marketing and operations endeavors. "He's the designer, and...I'm a marketer, a strategist, a writer, a publicist and more of a business person," she says of their side-by-side union.

Wendy Spivak and Sandy Lish started The Castle Group as a 50-50 partnership, and they haven't regretted — or reneged on — their decision. "We don't fight or argue.

Often we come to the same decision. If we don't, there's not a time when one or the other of us can't live with the decision," Lish says. Adds Spivak, "People told us not to do it — that 50-50 would not work. We will talk through something if one feels more strongly than the other."

Mother-daughter Mary O'Donnell and Keon Duggan have taken a tag-team approach at O'Donnell Sand & Gravel. O'Donnell grew the business and then, always involved in real estate, handed it off to her daughter, who practically grew up in

the business, to realize her village concept dream. Duggan, for her part, is winding down the sand and gravel operations to spin off a new masonry supply division.

Cindy Field Wall, fourth generation at family coffee business, Autocrat, is leading the gourmet coffee line, Newport Coffee Traders, while her brother oversees the 108-year-old company overall.

No matter how they're dividing up the duties, our partnership profiles are each leaving an imprint on her business that's as unique as her working relationship.

Partnership Equals Collaboration for Sandy Lish, Wendy Spivak

Equal leadership in company decision-making is tricky business, but for The Castle Group co-founders Sandy Lish and Wendy Spivak, the 50-50 partnership comes naturally. Together, they strike a perfect balance of differences (Lish heads the public relations side and is the excitable one; Spivak handles events management and is the calming influence) to similarities (both are passionate about their mission).

Their ability to work seamlessly in tandem is mirrored in collaborative, dedicated service that has grown the Boston-based firm from a half million dollars in 1996 to \$2.5 million today. And as they talk, just how they manage their shared responsibility becomes apparent.

"We don't fight or argue," Lish says of their working arrangement. "Often we come to the same decisions. If we don't,

there's not a time when one or the other of us can't live with the decision."

"People told us not to do it — that 50-50 would not work," Spivak says. "We will

be reassured everything's going to be OK," Lish adds.

"You do nag," Spivak counters, as if she's suddenly enlightened. "I never nag."

Obviously personable, humorous, open and honest, smart and conscientious, what you see is what you get — Lish and Spivak do make a terrific combination for clients and employees alike.

Attuned to the technology, financial services, health care, travel, education, professional services and hospitality markets, they deliver strategic, innovative public relations and events management to corporate clients such as Symantec, Microsoft, Harvard Medical School, AMICAS and MFS Investment Management.

Focusing primarily on media relations, Lish and her team get under a client's skin to operate hand-in-hand with proactive support. Tradeshow assistance, media training and presenta-



Sandy Lish and Wendy Spivak co-founded The Castle Group to do things differently — together.

talk through something if one feels more strongly than the other."

"If I'm the one who caves in, I constantly nag, "How are things going?" so I can

tion training also fall under her purview.

Spivak manages the corporate events side, from product launches to conferences to charitable fundraisers, and specializes in incentive programs that motivate and reward employees, thereby increasing sales and generating revenue, handling every detail from theme development to the culminating reward, typically a fabulous trip.

Together, they've ensured a positive workplace, employing their own promotions and incentive know-how to foster teambuilding and creativity. Routine, for example, are one-on-ones, when staff can bounce around ideas and ask questions, and monthly happy hours, which a continually reconstituted team plans on an allotted budget.

The business partners met in 1995 as client and service provider. Spivak was director of communications at a health care company seeking the services of Lish, who was vice president of a public relations agency. Over time, they got to know one another professionally and personally, becoming so close that each revealed her aspirations to strike out on her own to the other. Of her many hats, events had become Spivak's passion. Lish, in turn, wanted to continue in agency PR, but in a more nurturing culture.

They saw a niche for a firm deeply entrenched in both specialties, and so in 1996 they took the proverbial leap, set up shop in a ready-made suite and, each with a client in hand, got to work.

"We had grown in our careers independently, making things happen without a network, family or relatives," Lish says. "Doing that already, we felt we had the foundation to go into business for ourselves."

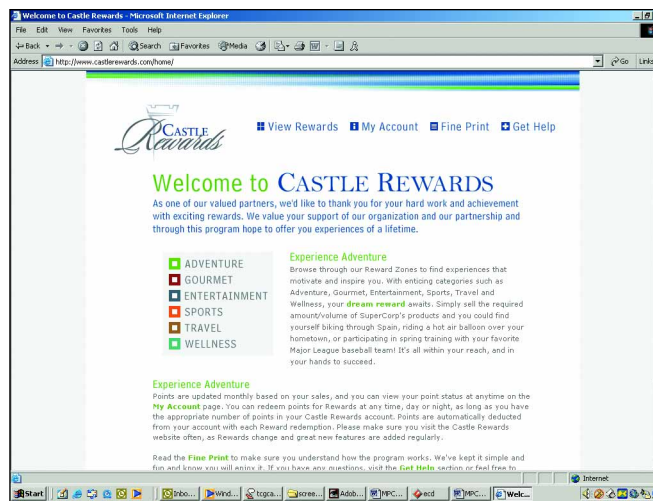
"And we needed each other," Spivak adds. "While we both had that background, we also needed the support of someone to bounce things off of, someone to talk through how we were going to develop things."

Early on, the partners discovered similarities in their upbringing that con-

tributed to a common basis for their gut decisions.

"That's not to say," Spivak begins...

"...Philosophically and personality-wise we're very different," Lish continues. "We come to a lot of the same decisions from different angles. I think we're both realistic, but Wendy thinks so optimistically and I think so pessimistically — so we meet in the middle."



In the beginning, the partner's formal structure was "that we were in the same room, and any breath either of us took, the other could hear," Lish says. "Because we were in such close quarters, we would tend to go out to dinner and make decisions and discuss. That continues to this day. It's good to get out of the environment and have fewer or different distractions."

"We had no formal business development training, but we were both working with clients and building up business as we went along, figuring out what we were good at, not good at, getting out there and meeting people," Spivak says. "Our initial couple of years, business grew by referral."

Today, The Castle Group, named to reflect solidity and support, employs 19 between the two divisions. Growth has been incremental, with Spivak and Lish adding several employees each year, an important factor not only in weathering the current economic climate but also in providing the best services without unnecessary overhead.

"Four years ago, a potential client, our largest so far, wanted to hire us but we would have had to grow too fast," Lish says. "And we never got too caught up in the crazy dot-com let's-charge-as-much-as-we-can. We operate conservatively with our own finances and understand that clients need to as well."

"That's not to say if the perfect client came along, we wouldn't take them on," Spivak says. "But in this economy, it's particularly important to have a controlled kind of growth so we grow appropriately and don't end up in a bad spot. Our goal is to double over the next two to three years."

To reach their goal, the business partners have hired a director of business development and a former state rep and lobbyist; launched an online rewards program for corporations, Castle Rewards, offering life experience rewards to client sales teams that exceed standard goals; and embarked on an aggressive networking and self-promotion plan. "The time to be out there is when it's more challenging to get business, not when it's easy," Lish says.

"We're also exploring and designing our options around the upcoming Democratic National Convention," Spivak says. "We see a lot of potential, starting with events but possibly going on to PR with corporations looking to make a statement or just have a party."

Although Lish and Spivak note that they've talked about exit strategy, they're nowhere near ready to let go. They've turned down merger and acquisition pitches, and they've managed to stay on top as a rare independent agency.

"I knew what I wanted when we started," Lish says, "fairness, fun, challenge, a sense of accomplishment and the freedom to make decisions."

"I always say my next job is retirement," Spivak says. "I don't think I could ever go back to working for anybody else. We're both control freaks, but I don't mean that in a bad way. We like the fact we're the decision-makers, that the buck stops here."