

MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

Marketing firm RockFish evolves into business consulting

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Kelle Kitchell-Cooper has done marketing and public relations work for nearly 20 years, including for Fortune 500 companies, but after a local project more than a year ago, she saw a need for comprehensive services for small businesses in the local area. So about a year ago, she launched the RockFish Group with the idea of bringing high-caliber local professionals, specializing in different areas, under one roof.

Since then, business not only has been booming but RockFish has been expanding its offerings, including business consulting.

"Business consulting almost came organically, as customers for different projects are identifying deficits. It's like peeling layers of an onion," she says. "They're asking us for ways to get healthy, whether it involves morale, process improvement or workflow issues... I do think we're able to motivate customers to begin a plan to get their business healthy."

Michele Doyle with Michele Interiors says her business was already doing well when she met Kitchell-Cooper, but she's been able to implement various new ideas since.

"She's taken a keen interest in my business and I know she's always thinking about it," says Doyle, whose business shares the same suite as RockFish in downtown Poulsbo. "She's looked at how I do business and offered me some tools for productivity, especially communication... When I see her, it's a daily kick in the pants for me as a manager and entrepreneur. She's like that voice inside you that you can't take for granted."

Kitchell-Cooper, who has a team of six people, opened the downtown office last summer with only two or three spaces in the suite and since then the RockFish Group grew to occupy all of it except for Doyle's office. Kitchell-Cooper also recruited Doyle to collaborate on RockFish projects when customers need design or remodeling services, especially so their space matches their brand.

"She's got a visionary mindset and sees potential in her clients that I don't think they even recognize, and that's contagious," Doyle says.

The RockFish Group (www.rockfishgroup.com) offers services ranging from marketing and PR to branding, e-commerce solutions and project development. The firm's client base stretches all over the country, and Kitchell-Cooper says business has been growing strictly through word of mouth.

She says one of the things that makes the business unique is the continuous search for new tools — tools that the RockFish tests and implements first, then passes along to clients. The strategy has been so successful that the company is in the process of developing its own tool, an online-based product catalog that will help streamline the sales and ordering process both for products and services. Kitchell-Cooper says the software tool will be funded through venture capitalism and she expects it to roll out next year. She notes it's a side project so they're taking it slowly while focusing on their core services.

"'New school' management consulting is about the tools, and speaking with a person versus to them. We truly come with a bag of options," she says.

Kitchell-Cooper brims with ideas for things she wants to do. A recent one was to add a conference room in the RockFish suite that will be available for her clients to use, both to meet with customers and get some work done while away from their office. She says this free service will especially benefit entrepreneurs who are home-based or people whose business doesn't have a private place to meet. She says she sees people conducting confidential business in public settings — such as coffee shops — far too often, and this will give her clients an alternative.

The conference room, which will be completed in the next few weeks, will have WiFi and Apple TV (for those who want to hook up their laptops for a presentation). A system will be in place for people to reserve the room via phone or email.

Jennifer Lampe, marketing director for Port Ludlow Associates, says what sets RockFish Group apart is the combination of local knowledge and the quality of the team.

"They're a local-based team with the understanding of the local market but the knowledge base and caliber of a metropolitan firm. They're highly competitive with Seattle firms but knowledgeable of the local market — they bridge that gap," she says.

She says Kitchell-Cooper's personality was one of the things that immediately set her apart. "She's a bundle of energy that doesn't quit," Lampe says, "and the most positive person I can imagine."



RockFish Group Staff (Photo by Crystal-Photography.com)

