

DAILY BEE

SUNDAY/MONDAY

MAY 31, 2015

VOL. 50 NO. 10

Keokee presses past quarter century mark

Sandpoint firm thrives in changing industry

By DAVID GUNTER
Feature correspondent

SANDPOINT — Twenty-five years in the publishing trade will take you through some big changes. Not Gutenberg Press kind of big, perhaps, but substantial enough to require a name change and a revised approach to corraling words

and getting them in front of readers.

"That's the funny about this business," said Chris Bessler, who founded what was then known as Keokee Co. Publishing in 1990. "We started out as a publishing and editorial service. Since then, we've morphed into a media and marketing company."

In the quarter century that Bessler has captained his ship, Keokee has published 35 books, produced three glossy magazine titles and helped launch

hundreds of web sites. It is that last area that has brought about a sea change, according to Bessler.

"In general, the Internet has upended the print industry," said the president and CEO, whose company now hosts 160 sites on its server and provides development and management services for a couple hundred more. "But print still generates a ton more revenue for media companies."

See **KEOKEE**, Page 3

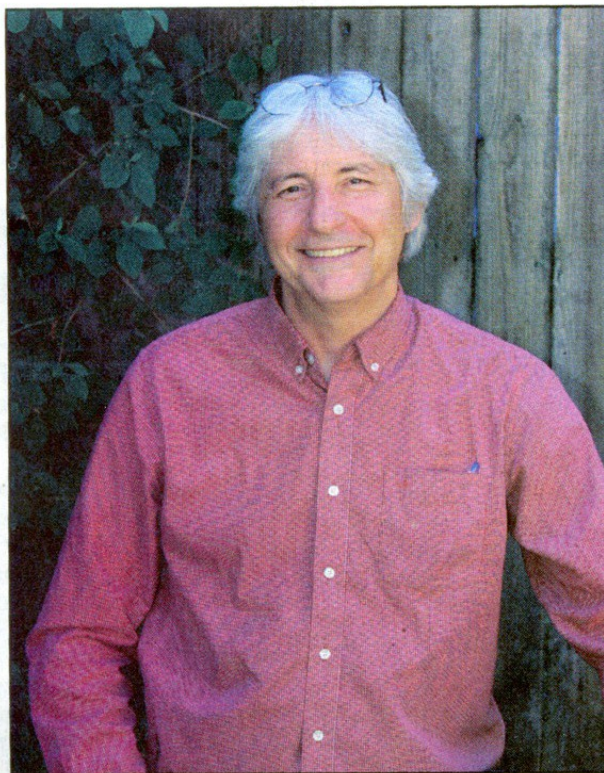
KEOKEE

Continued from Page 1

Which could explain why Keokee so skillfully straddles the publishing fence today, keeping a foot planted in both arenas.

It's not the first time its founder has been faced with obvious dichotomy. When he christened Keokee and opened his small office in Pioneer Square, the \$25 desk he bought at a local thrift store had a typewriter return — a flip-up storage compartment that would either hide or allow access to a manual typewriter as needed. Instead of the noisy clack of those keys, Bessler worked with the quiet click of the keyboard of his first-generation Macintosh computer, which sat tucked into the spot its technological predecessor would have been.

His first job was to produce the newsletter for the Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce — a print piece that generated



—Photo by DAVID GUNTER

Chris Bessler, president and CEO of Keokee, a marketing and communications firm, has used technology to guide his business through constantly changing tides since he first opened shop in Sandpoint 25 years ago.

no money, but gave him a leave-behind as he scouted for assignments in brochure design and miscellaneous publishing.

Bessler previously had worked as a reporter and then editor for the Bonners Ferry Herald starting in 1978, spent some time traveling Europe, and then returned to Sandpoint to take those same titles at the Daily Bee from 1982-86. The following year, he signed on at an alternative weekly in Santa Cruz, Calif., where he also was introduced to the world of periodicals through a sideline venture called Cruisin' Magazine.

Two things happened at that point in his career — one earth shattering, the other earth shaking.

"I was introduced to desktop publishing on the Mac," he said. "Suddenly, the power that was given to us with that little computer was more than we had with the \$30,000-\$40,000 typesetting machines."

The real shakeup came, however, when the

KEOKEE

Continued from Page 1

1989 earthquake rattled Candlestick Park during the World Series, snapped a section of the Bay Bridge and found Bessler alone in the office as windows exploded from their frames and dust filled the air around him. The next day, the ruined building was surrounded by police tape — a barrier that didn't stop his boss, who suggested they sneak in and retrieve their Macs. During the covert excursion, Bessler confided that the earthquake had him worked up enough to leave California with his wife, Sandy, and toddler son, Nate. His boss understood and gave him the Macintosh as a parting gift.

"So, I was out of work, but I had a computer," he said. "Sandpoint called and we came back."

The third time proved a charm for this trip back to the Northwest, especially as Keokee started to branch out from newsletters to magazines. The first glossy publication came about when he made a pitch for Schweitzer Magazine, which then was being produced out of Bozeman, Mont. Decision makers on the ski hill saw the community at large as a selling point for trips to the

mountain and thus was born the first issue of Sandpoint Magazine.

At about that same time, Keokee made its first foray into the book world when it published a title called "The Klockmann Diaries" about an entrepreneur who grubstaked prospectors and wound up as a successful partner of the Continental Mine in the upper Selkirks. The small publisher made the call to print 500 copies as an initial press run.

"Big mistake," said Bessler. "We sold out in a month."

Almost three-dozen titles later, he has learned from early mistakes, as well as benefited from continued changes in the industry. The most recent innovation was put to use for Keokee's latest title, the upcoming "Inland Salish Journey: Fur Trade to Settlement."

"It's called 'print on demand' and it has completely changed publishing," Bessler said, explaining that the trade-off for lower book margins is the ability to print only the number of copies needed at a certain point in time, rather than having to sit on several thousand copies.

Belying predictions to the contrary, the specter of electronic books wiping

traditional manuscripts off the planet appears to have passed, according to the publisher. Although he favors such devices for some reading applications, Bessler remains a true fan of the printed page.

"The sales of e-books have flattened out in the last year or two," he said. "I think print books will be around for a while."

The number of companies that print them, on the other hand, has tapered off.

"Books are really a labor of love," said Bessler. "There are very few small presses left, because it's so difficult."

As margins and book publishers keep shrinking, so, too, does that corner of Keokee's operation. Books now represent only about 20 percent of the business, with magazines contributing 35 percent and marketing clocking in at just under half of total income.

There's a saying about career journalists that states they have "ink in their blood." In Bessler's case, that maxim could be revised to say he has "stories in his soul." Love of a good tale has fueled Sandpoint Magazine from that first

winter issue of 1991 to today, though the publisher points out that the biannual magazine world has few corollaries to his former work at daily and weekly newspapers.

"It's a different animal," he said. "We're rarely going to cover something first in the magazine, so our emphasis is to try and cover it better."

From a one-man shop 25 years ago to a nine-person marketing communications firm today, Keokee has evolved along with a publishing world that bears little resemblance to the one Bessler first encountered as a cub reporter. The one constant has been the ever-present shadow of deadlines waiting to be met.

"We're constantly juggling deadlines," he said, listing Sandpoint, Flyfisher and a newly minted version of Schweitzer magazines, as well as titles such as the just-published coffee table book "Many Waters" — a natural history of the Walla Walla River Valley — and SandpointOnline.com among the duties that keep his office busy. "On any given day, we have well over a hundred projects going on."