

The New New Media

Bridging the Gap Between Business and Design

By Marie Lesoway



TAKE TWO SCHOOL OF BUSINESS STUDENTS, one digital arts whiz, add a heap of daring, creativity, and a solid work ethic. And what do you get? Somnia Productions Inc. – a new, new media company that takes an interdisciplinary approach to electronic communication.

Somnia was launched in January by Ryan Hastman (4th-year BCom), Chris Glubish ('99 BCom) and Mike Benson. Its trademark is cutting-edge technology and vibrant design combined with a down-to-business approach.

“Other firms ‘think business’ or ‘think design,’” Ryan explains. “At Somnia we try to bridge these two worlds and combine the strengths of each.”

“We start by working with our clients to figure out what they need and why,” adds Chris. “For example, we don’t want to put our customers on the Web just for the sake of being there. We try to understand their business first – so we can find new media-based solutions that save them money or help them earn more revenue. We want to make a difference to their bottom line.”

Somnia uses its bottom-line approach to develop and produce Web sites, videos, CDs and electronic

business cards. It combines traditional tools like photography or writing with new technology that makes it possible to communicate in new ways.

Somnia has developed proprietary technology that can make a Web site “dynamic” by linking it with a database. “That means ‘anything can be changed,’” says Chris. “You can update information immediately without the design guys getting mad at you. You can change structure, content, design, text, or even colour. And we’ve made it very easy to use. My mom could update our Web site if she wanted to.” In fact, Mom was part of the test group that ensured the new technology was user friendly.

Somnia used its new technology to develop a new approach to virtual reality tours based on 360° panoramic photography. “360° shots have been around for a long time,” says Ryan. “But with our technology, we can make them interactive and content-centred instead of just a neat toy to play with.”

In Somnia’s virtual tour of the Winspear Centre in Edmonton, visitors can navigate by clicking on a map, using a drop-down menu, or entering through a virtual doorway.

They can click on interactive content hotspots – like the grand piano – to get additional information in the form of text, video, and audio clips.

The interface was user tested (yes, Mom was recruited again) and the result is a tool that is both powerful and easy to use.



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"But it's worth it," says Chris, "because we're free to do what we're interested in. It's exciting. It's fun. There are no limits. And we're doing the things we love to do."

Interactive virtual reality is just one of Somnia's new tools. "We're developing new ideas and expanding into new areas every day," says Chris. "And instead of working for the man, we're out there doing it ourselves."

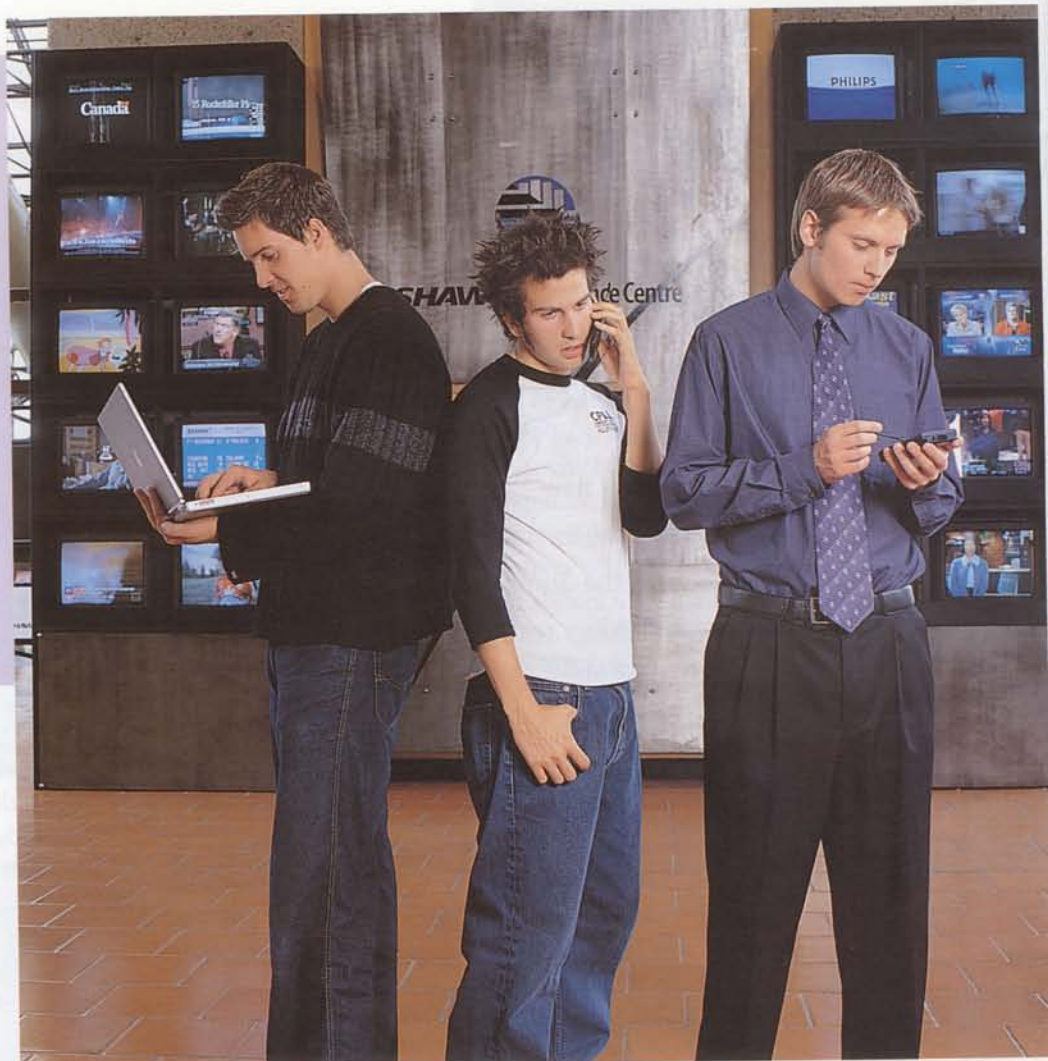
"It's kind of our passion," adds Ryan. "That's why we got started."

The spark that turned their passion into a new business came from an entrepreneurship class Ryan took with Pablo Martin De Holan, the Bombardier Professor of Entrepreneurship. "The course became a reality," says Ryan. "We launched Somnia and became entrepreneurs."

Professor Martin De Holan continues to be an inspiration and mentor for the new company. "We still meet with him regularly – to get his advice and pilot our ideas," says Ryan. "Often he shoots holes through them," laughs Chris. "But it forces us to come to terms with the why of what we're proposing."

Chris and Ryan say their training at the School of Business also helps. They learned how to work with diverse groups of people, how to rally around ideas, and how to come to a consensus and work towards it. Their courses gave them a solid technical education. They mastered practical skills – like using spreadsheets – and learned about the possibilities offered by new technology.

"That's really important in our business," says Ryan. "It helps us give our clients a vision of what



From left to right: Chris Glubish, Mike Benson and Ryan Hastman

new media can do for them. The network of contacts we made at school has been a great boost for us too."

What advice do Chris and Ryan have for would-be entrepreneurs?

"You need to know a little bit about everything," says Ryan. "You need to diversify your learning. And you need life experience too. That means getting involved in as many different things as you can." Ryan continues, "Being an entrepreneur is hard. It's hard work and long hours, and there's no safety net."

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The Somnia partners wouldn't have it any other way. **B**

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