



A Couple of Chicks

There's nothing fowl about these chicks

By George Bailey

■ When Niagara Falls resident and Brock University graduate, Alicia Whalen speaks about "A Couple of Chicks", the company she and her partner, Patricia Brusha, founded in 2005, she beams with excitement. She oozes energy. You're hard-pressed not to smile back at her passion.

So what is "A Couple of Chicks"? Whalen says, "Technically, it's an internet marketing, distribution revenue measuring company that specializes in online tourism marketing. In other words, our company tells other companies how to get more visitors to their website and buy from them." If you judge by the list of some of their 70 clientele - Marriott International, Nova Scotia Tourism, Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, Yahoo Canada, Travel Alberta, Vancouver Coast and Mountains Tourism - and the Sports Museum of America (NYC), they're very good at what they do.

Whalen, a 32 year-old mother of two small children, was just three

months into her maternity leave as Marketing Director for the Niagara 21 Century Group where she had spent eight years developing search engine strategies and measuring online investment for large branded hotels, resorts and destination portal websites in Niagara Falls, when she met with business associate Brusha for lunch. It was over this lunch that "A Couple of Chicks" was hatched. Like Whalen, Brusha, a 26-year veteran of the hospitality industry working in sales, marketing and online search marketing, had a passion for helping tourism businesses become successful online. Whalen says with a smile, "We knew from the start we had >>



Alicia Whalen & Patricia Brusha



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>> the magic formula of drive, technological know-how, love for tourism, and passion for education to make A Couple of Chicks e-marketing fly – even as many of our friends questioned the decision to form a business solely around marketing on the internet*.

Who said chicks can't fly?

Fly they have.

Whalen and Brusha have no traditional office, both still work from their homes, and their flock has grown to include ten other "chicks" (whom they refer to as co-op entrepreneurs) found throughout Canada and the United States. Together, they've built a business with more than \$1.2 million in revenues in 2008.

Whalen, who spoke recently at a Niagara Falls Tourism Marketing Summit told her audience of tourism professionals, "Use your websites to stand out and be remembered – make it easy for them to purchase your product. The power of the internet is amazing."

Peter Yesawich, Chairman and CEO of Ypartnership, one of America's leading marketing, advertising and public relations agency serving travel, leisure and lifestyle clients, also spoke at the summit. A frequent commentator on travel trends in such publications as The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times and The Wall Street Journal, Yesawich stated, "Almost six out of ten leisure travelers now go exclusively

to the Internet when planning vacations, and online bookings continue to grow as a result. As a result, your website is your new cash register and Alicia Whalen understands how to make that cash register ring."

An interesting offshoot of A Couple of Chicks are their successful 'Online Revealed Canada' events, four internet marketing conferences produced in Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Puerto Rico. Most exciting for our region, 'Online Revealed', in association with Yahoo! Canada, will bring more than 300 Canadian tourism professionals and industry experts to Niagara Falls in 2009.

Brusha and Whalen have been invited to speak or sit on more than 20 panels including: Canada e-connect, The Bi-national Tourism Council, OTMP Tourism and Yahoo! Canada Search Days. In addition, they have published more than 30 articles and maintain an active educational blog, www.idea-hatching.com. A Couple of Chicks also provide learning opportunities about search engine optimization and online marketing best practices in their popular "Get Cracking" e-marketing workshops.

Is there no end to this chick talk? What's with the name?

Whalen says it was Amy Seagram, the company's creative director from day one who came up with the first, "chicks" creative. It

came to her after she fed her son Zak using a bib with an illustration of a yellow chick on the fateful day that Whalen and Brusha had lunch. The original chick caricatures of Cici and Petunia are the childhood names of Whalen and Patricia.

You have to wonder how Whalen can juggle a successful company and share the raising of two busy children – six-year-old Ellie and three-year-old Zachary – with her husband Tim. She even finds time to coach her daughter's soccer team.

With that ever-present smile Whalen explains, "I have a very supportive family and a great family network that all help out. But most of all I'm good at turning it off, and that includes my Blackberry!"

What does the future hold? "Our company is still in the toddler stage, just like Zak," says Whalen. "All I know is that I'm having a ball and that we're making a positive difference in helping tourism businesses grow. There's no end in sight. Before you know it we'll be full-grown chickens!"

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