

ENTREPRENEUR / BEST PRACTICES

# OUT ON YOUR OWN

29-year-old learns lessons building company

By David G. Hack

**T**aking a snapshot of Andrew Van Fleet is probably the only way you will get a static view of this dynamic young man.

A man on the move, with courage to grow, to change and "go with the flow," Van Fleet is like the symbolic logo of his company, Darning Pixels Inc. in Waterloo. This 29-year-old entrepreneur is multifaceted and is quickly weaving together personal expertise, quality services and a solid client base to make his mark on the business world.

When Van Fleet graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in 1998 with a degree in graphic design and a business minor, he knew he wanted to work with the Internet to design positive user experiences.

He initially went to work in 1997 as a user interface designer for TEAM Technologies, an Internet services company in Cedar Falls.

Two years later, Van Fleet joined IT-Radar, an online IT services marketplace based in Minneapolis, as a senior user interface designer. When the company was later sold, his position was dissolved.

Van Fleet decided he could free-lance his Web designing skills from his home. He turned his free-lance work into a business and with the help of the University of Northern Iowa Regional Business Center in Waterloo, Darning Pixels was founded in 2001.

Darning Pixels offers services in Web site design, custom programming, user interface design, user testing expertise, multi-media design, traditional print materials and brand identity creation.

"It was scary to strike out on my own," he said. "I tried to turn my uncertainty into fuel. I use my fears to add breadth to my broad spectrum of accomplishments."



**Andrew Van Fleet of Waterloo owns Darning Pixels Inc., a Web-design and graphic design company.** Mark Tade photo

## Advice for entrepreneurs

- ▶ Better to try and fail than not to try at all.
- ▶ Know when to let go.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- ▶ Research, research, research.
- ▶ Have a backup plan.
- ▶ Bring in needed experts.
- ▶ Accept "no," but ask why.
- ▶ Give back. When you are successful, it is your responsibility to give back to the community.
- ▶ Don't worry about what others think, you only have to answer to yourself.

Van Fleet attributes much of his early success to the assistance of the business center. He learned to set goals and parameters, give himself time to reach them and then to adjust them accordingly.

As the business has grown, he has shifted from making a fixed price bid for a project to bidding based on an estimate of the amount of time a project will require.

TURN TO 23

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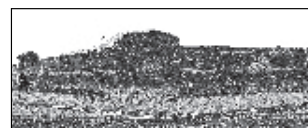
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"It is important to ask for help," Van Fleet says. "There is a wealth of support and information. It's good to have a safety net. Bring in needed experts. Determine your strengths and weaknesses and hire others to help you."

Van Fleet's business plan makes use of client referrals. To ensure client satisfaction, Darning Pixels has developed a project methodology called APT — analyze, produce, test.

"We differentiate ourselves by following the project methodology of using small iterations, versus a linear development path," he said. "During every step of the project, our methodology helps us to verify our clients are receiving the product they envision and expect."

During its first years of business, growth has been strong. Within 10 years, Van Fleet expects to grow from two to 10 employees.

Van Fleet has not experienced any major setbacks. He also doesn't feel his age has been a factor. "When I sit down face to face with a client, the ideas override my age," he says.

## BUSINESS CASUAL

### NOVEMBER

**4-5 Hypnotist Jim Wand.** Penguins Comedy Club, Cedar Rapids. (319) 362-8133, [www.penguinscomedyclub.com](http://www.penguinscomedyclub.com)

**4 Iowa Hawkeye women's basketball (Australian Institute of Sports).** 7:05 p.m. Carver-Hawkeye Arena, Iowa City. \$7. 1-(800) IA-HAWKS (1-(800) 424-2957), <http://hawkeyesports.collegesports.com>

**4-7 Muro-Ami** presented by University Theatres Mainstage. \$17. (319) 335-3213. [www.culturalcorridor.org](http://www.culturalcorridor.org)

**4-7 Bat Boy: The Musical** presented by City Circle Acting Company. 8 p.m., 2:30 p.m. Sunday matinee. Oakdale Auditorium, Oakdale Campus. (319) 248-1750. [www.culturalcorridor.org](http://www.culturalcorridor.org)

**5 Dan Knight** at The Museum. 5 p.m. University Museum of Art. \$10. (319) 335-1727. [www.culturalcorridor.org](http://www.culturalcorridor.org)

**6 Iowa Hawkeye football vs. Purdue** (Parents Weekend). TBA. Kinnick Stadium, Iowa City. \$44. 1-(800) IA-HAWKS (1-(800) 424-2957), <http://hawkeyesports.collegesports.com>

**6 Iowa Hawkeye men's basketball (Black and Gold Blowout).** TBA. Carver-Hawkeye Arena, Iowa City. \$13. 1-(800) IA-HAWKS (1-(800) 424-2957), <http://hawkeyesports.collegesports.com>

**10 Musicians from Marlboro.** 8 p.m. Clapp Recital Hall, Iowa City. \$15 to \$28. 1-(800) HANCHER. [www.hancher.uiowa.edu](http://www.hancher.uiowa.edu)

**10 Iowa Hawkeye men's basketball (The Miracle Game vs. Upper Iowa presented by UIHC).** 7:05 p.m. Carver-Hawkeye Arena, Iowa City. \$13. 1-(800) IA-HAWKS (1-(800) 424-2957), <http://hawkeyesports.collegesports.com>

**10-17 Muro-Ami** presented by University Theatres Mainstage. \$17. (319) 335-3213. [www.culturalcorridor.org](http://www.culturalcorridor.org)

**11 Iowa Hawkeye women's basketball (Truman State).** 7:05 p.m. Carver-Hawkeye Arena, Iowa City. \$7. 1-(800) IA-HAWKS (1-(800) 424-2957), <http://hawkeyesports.collegesports.com>

**12 National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library 10th Annual Fall Dinner.** The Marriott, 7 p.m. For more information, (319) 362-8500. [www.ncsml.org](http://www.ncsml.org)

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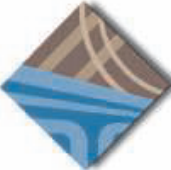
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