

## Packaging entrepreneurs' path to success went from cubicle to coffee shop



Tom Newmaster and Brian Harper, founders of FORCEpkg in Lancaster, moved the firm into its first office at the W.W. Griest Building, six months ago after two years of operating remotely. PHOTO/ IOANNIS PASHAKIS

Posters of every major Star Wars film line a wall in a conference room and memorabilia from the films decorate the entrance at **FORCEpkg's** office in downtown Lancaster.

Founders Tom Newmaster and Brian Harper don't want their love for the science fiction classics to take away from the work they do at their package design and brand development firm, but there is a thread that ties together why they started the business and their love for the Star Wars franchise – freedom.

For 30 years, Newmaster and Harper have worked together in various design agencies. Their longest stint in a business together was at Berks County-based William Fox Munroe or WFM, a design agency that Newmaster purchased with three other partners in 1998.

Shortly after Newmaster sold his interest in WFM in early 2017, FORCEpkg was up and running from the dining room table in his home in Lebanon County. Within a few months there was a newly renovated studio in the house which included a printer to make prototype packaging, but the majority of FORCEpkg's work was done at local coffee shops.

Unrestrained by nothing but a good internet connection, FORCEpkg's clients began to grow and so did the number of freelancers Newmaster hired to keep up with the work, and one of those freelancers was Harper.

"For the last 20 years, even though it was the environment I helped create, it was – show up to your office and go to your cubicle," Newmaster said. "We didn't want that anymore."

Then in 2018, tired of feeling tethered to their desks and no longer satisfied with a 9-to-5 work week, the two package design and branding industry veterans decided to formalize a new company concept and business partnership.

"It was about not being confined to an office, you don't have to get in your seat at 7:30 and start working," said Harper. "Doing the same type of work but not being tethered to a desk is a nice thing for creatives to have – it allows them to be creative in different environments."

FORCEpkg's clients include Robitussin, Advil, ChapStick and Stoner Invisible Glass. The firm creates packaging designs and develops brands for their clients with the point of sale in mind, Newmaster said.

Harper and Newmaster would meet their team at any business with a good internet connection. The company is cloud based, allowing them to work through laptops and phones from anywhere.

"You quickly figure out when the Wi-Fi is good and where it is good," Harper said.

While the team enjoyed the freedom working remotely gave them, a growing base of full-time employees and the desire to have a gathering place that wasn't based the crew finding a table at a coffee shop, led FORCEpkg to find an office space they could make their own.

They found it on the top floor of the W.W. Griest Building at 8 N. Queen St. in Lancaster. When designing the space for their office, Harper told the architect design it like a coffee shop.

The firm has been there for six months and has grown its staff to 12 people.

The office consists of one communal space and a conference room separated by a glass wall that often features drawings of popular characters from their favorite movie franchise. Employees work on movable desks and can mix their seating arrangements anyway they want.

The emphasis on freedom that FORCEpkg was built on is still evident in the firm's attitude.

New employees are expected to be able to work in an unconventional environment and some work remotely from their client's offices. The company is also lenient if employees need to take time for personal matters.

"It's a lot of trust," Newmaster said. "If there is any doubt about that trust it just doesn't work."

Not everyone entering FORCEpkg's office immediately sees the connection to Star Wars. What was important, according to Newmaster and Harper, was to work on their terms in a way offered employees freedom and inspired creativity.

Along with their base of clients, the firm is currently building its knowledge of CBD and cannabis packaging. Newmaster has visited dispensaries and producers in Colorado and has kept close ties with experts in the industry.

The two founders hope to grow the company in the direction of marijuana packaging consulting and designing if Pennsylvania approves recreational marijuana.

"Eventually it is probably going to happen in Pennsylvania," Newmaster said. "I wanted to establish ourselves as an expert on the subject matter and there is no one here so why not establish ourselves."



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