

Rising to the occasions: after 20 years, Current Affairs blossoms from a catering business into a full-service event-planning and production company.

Upon turning 100 years old, Young Brothers Ltd. wanted to host an anniversary event for its clients and employees. But it didn't want any of the standard party staples, such as paper tablecloths and foods served in large, aluminum pans. The veteran shipping company wanted something extraordinary to celebrate its century-old business. Young Brothers contracted the event-planning services of Current Affairs.

The Celebration, held in October 2000, on the company's brand new inter-island barge, was nothing short of spectacular. Linens were draped over 20-foot planks resting on elevated forklifts, which served as tables. Similar planks stacked in front of a shipping container became a stage. Inside the container, cases of beer were stacked to look like product, while atop it, performers sang and danced.

High above the crowd, a Young Brothers executive, suspended in the air by a giant crane, told the story of how the company crone to Hawaii 100 years prior.

The highlight was a ceremonious candle lighting led by Young Brothers President Glenn K.Y. Hong. Standing tall and proud on one of his forklifts, Hong lit a single candle. At the same time, each of his 50 salespeople and 50 or their clients also lit candles, signifying 100 years in business. Behind them, a fireboat passed by, shooting water in all directions.

Those in attendance were awestruck. But for the creative team at Current Affairs, the wildly extravagant event was just business as usual. Current Affairs, which earns between \$1 million to \$2 million annually and celebrates its own milestone this year (20 years in business), has put on thousands of events at least as elaborate as the Young Brothers' soiree during the past two decades. It has done a Sopranos party for the folks at HBO, the Readers Choice Awards for Conde Nast Publications and the Ala Moana Shopping Center's Red Party, to name a few.

But the company didn't shoot out of the gates master planning fanciful shindigs. Far from an overnight success, it was originally a glorified catering business that evolved through several incarnations (including operating a full-scale restaurant and kitchen) before achieving an efficient, comfortable and profitable business model.

IF YOU CAN'T TAKE THE HEAT, GET OUT OF THE KITCHEN

Right from the start, the company suffered an identity crisis. Not only did clients misunderstand exactly what the company did, but the president, Philip Richardson, fell slightly off track from his original plan. He had set out to start an event-planning business, which, instead, became tagged as a catering company. It turned out that, the original name, International Catering Concepts, which Richardson felt would suggest more than just food services, proved too unwieldy for clients. They just couldn't get around the word "catering."

So the name of the business was the first thing to go. At first, it was shortened to ICC, which only further confused its clientele, and in the early '90s, Richardson renamed the company Current Affairs, after its newsletter.

But in the midst of all the name changing to avoid being labeled "simply a caterer," the company had become just that. "We would tickle it--try to tease it and do things that are peripheral to catering, like entertainment and decorations," says Richardson, who began the business out of his home in Liliha. "But what we were really doing was glorified catering."

In fact, the emphasis on food preparation was so heavy that, in 1995, the company purchased a kitchen in Kakaako. Prior to that, it had been working with random local chefs. "We ended up doing an event for 10,000 people, and our business advisors said, 'If we're doing events that large and we don't have control of the food, whoa--scary!' At the time, I agreed," says Richardson. "Well, that kitchen became the biggest nightmare of my life."

Not only was Richardson bogged down by the logistics of operating a kitchen, he suddenly found himself in uncharted, undesirable territory. "The kitchen had a storefront, so we opened a restaurant, called Keawe Cafe. Suddenly, we were spending more time managing a restaurant and worrying about paying rent than we were spending planning events," he says. "We ended up getting into the retail business, and that's the last place I wanted to be."

So, in 1999, after four years of owning Keawe Cafe, Current Affairs got out of the kitchen, so to speak, and Richardson began a major overhaul of the business. "The company was moving in the wrong direction, because it was being driven by food sales," he recalls. "I didn't feel good about the business anymore, because my passion has never been just throwing food on the table. I've always wanted to present food and show it off and wrap it up with a whole load of atmosphere."

Upon divesting the company of the restaurant, Richardson decided that Current Affairs would focus first and foremost on event planning, and would leave the cooking to the professionals. He began working with chef David Paul of Diamond Head Grill, and it wasn't long before he was partnering with other renowned local chefs, such as Roy Yamaguchi, Alan Wong and Sam Choy.

The partnerships proved largely successful for all involved. Current Affairs breathed easier after washing its hands of culinary duties, while the chefs benefited from the extra exposure and additional business. "[Partnering with Current Affairs] has been great. It's kept us alive on some slower weeks, when we'd otherwise not have anything going on," says chef Mariano L'alica of Meritage restaurant, who has catered no fewer than 20 events for Current Affairs since last October. Even though catering for Current Affairs earns L'alica roughly half of what he could charge per head if Meritage catered the event itself, he says there's no way he could coordinate parties of the same caliber.

"Philip and his team put on the most outrageous parties. They do things that normal restaurants, or even most event-planning companies, simply don't have the manpower, resources or planning skills necessary to pull off," he says. "Our business has benefited from it, and I personally enjoy being associated with the kind of parties they throw."

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

With the support of several A-list chefs and a budding reputation for planning grandiose events, Current Affairs earned enough cachet to become choosy about its clientele. Instead of pushing for quantity, the company emphasized producing quality events. "In the old days, we'd grab everything we possibly could, for fear of losing business to our competitors, but now we have the ability to say no," says Richardson. "And that ability has meant a world of difference, because we now have the time to plan really dramatic, innovative events."

Current Affairs went from "catering" 220 to 300 events per year, to "planning and producing" 100 to 160 highly theatrical events annually. The company also instituted a minimum fee (\$2,500 per event), which helped to refine its customer base and pushed up profit margins. "When we streamlined our business, sales didn't increase. They even went down a bit. But we went from negative into 10 percent to 15 percent profitability," says Richardson.

Current Affairs doesn't require a minimum number of guests, but fewer people typically means higher per-person costs. A typical 500-guest event costs anywhere from \$60 to \$1,000 per person, whereas a luxurious anniversary dinner for two can easily exceed \$7,000 each.

Pricey? Yes. But Richardson says you get what you pay for. While most customers initially balk at Current Affairs' outrageous rates, by the end of the event, they're usually singing high praises.

"I was very skeptical when I first met with Philip, because I couldn't figure out what I needed him for. I already had the basics of what most people need to have a party," says Bruce Bucky, president of Hildgund Jewelers, who ended up dishing out \$20,000 for Current Affairs to plan his New Year's Eve bash in 2003. "But after the party he threw for us, we're already talking about what we're going to do for next New Year's."

Bucky's disco-themed party exceeded his wildest expectations. Sushi, fondue and grill stations were scattered throughout his Portlock property and a 10-foot guitar was mounted to the roof. Rock videos were relayed onto a 20-foot window covered in latex, visible to guests inside and outside the house. And his 100-plus guests danced beneath disco balls and spinning lights until dawn.

"I've had parties before, but never to this extent," says Bucky, who's contemplating a barnyard hootenanny theme for this year's bash. "It was just ridiculously flamboyant. And from the start, Philip was just as excited about it as I was."

Richardson says the shift from high-quantity to high-quality events is what opened up the door to coordinating such extraordinary parties: "We found our focus again. We said to ourselves, 'We're not in the business of throwing food on a brown paper tablecloth. We do full-scale event production. We go for the Wow!'"

When conceptualizing an event, he and his team think way, way outside of the box. For a James Bond-themed party for the Young Presidents' Organization, Current Affairs orchestrated bomb explosions, scuba divers, speedboats and a submarine ride. For a Honolulu Academy of Arts soiree, it once gathered a mime, an Indian musical trio, a group of Shaolin warriors, a 10-foot "living tree" and a court jester under one roof. And it threw out all conventional wisdom when it transformed the Sheraton Waikiki Ballroom into an extreme sports spectacle--complete with skateboard ramps, a 10-foot wave and hordes of professional skaters and bikers --for a special convention for McDonalds of China.

Often, the events are so captivating that even Richardson can't resist getting in on the fun. At a recent party celebrating a Japan and Paris exhibit at the Academy of Arts, he donned a black beret and spoke with a French accent, which he claims went over "magnifique!"

"These guys really get into it," says Bucky. "They put a lot of thought into each and every detail and that's what distinguishes them from other event planning companies."

THE LAST TURN

It took the better half of two decades, but, Richardson declares with confidence, Current Affairs has officially turned the corner from catering company to full-service event planning and production. Still, despite the ability to occasionally turn away business, the company certainly isn't resting on its laurels. It still faces a number of challenges, beginning with a cyclical market. Event planning is a luxury service, after all--one for which few companies and people have budgets, particularly in times of economic uncertainty. Furthermore, Richardson says, it's only now that local people are beginning to understand the purpose and value of hiring professional event planners.

According to Richardson, even though locals make up 60 percent of Current Affairs' client base, they account for only 35 percent of the company's gross annual revenues. "Locally, people didn't know what an event planner was 20 years ago," he says. "So we've still got a lot of work to do in terms of marketing ourselves to that segment."

The company's biggest challenge of late, however, has been attracting repeat business. "Sure, we get repeat clients, but sometimes we may not hear from someone for years, then all of a sudden they have a big, juicy event," says Richardson. "We want to be sure they remember to call us."

So in order to keep top of mind with former clients, Richardson opened a new business about a year and a half ago, a subsidiary to Current Affairs, called Spandex USA Hawaii. The company, which rents and sells specialized table linens, reaches a much broader audience, and allows Richardson to maintain year-round communication with clients.

Richardson says the company is doing very well and growing. But don't expect this new business to sidetrack him as easily as the kitchen once did. "Oh, I won't let that happen again. I learned that lesson the hard way," he says laughingly. "Now, I only focus on things I'm passionate about. And my passion has always been creating innovative events."