

# Clay Pot helps small businesses get creative

By Kate Hawthorne  
khawthorne@ncbr.com

Clay Pot Creative was born of frustration.

In 2000, Julia Leach was working as a project manager for a Web development firm as a project manager, but became discouraged when so many custom solutions she proposed for smaller clients got shot down.

"I saw the need to work with small businesses, but the company would only offer cookie-cutter solutions," she recalled. "Small businesses could either pick package A, B, or C or spend tens of thousands of dollars for custom design, which they couldn't afford. I got fed up, and decided to strike out on my own."

The wisdom of that decision is obvious, 10 years later, when 280 percent revenue growth since 2007 has catapulted Clay Pot to the top spot on the Mercury 100 list among companies with revenues of \$2 million and under.

For Leach, it wasn't just about making money.

"I felt the bigger agencies were taking advantage of small businesses, and not offering any kind of education on what is a good Web strategy," she said.

Leach, whose varied background also includes programming and design, started out as a one-person shop. She focused on local businesses that were "big enough to need a marketing team not big enough to be able to afford one in-house." For her team, she called on a network of freelancers, and grew her client list almost strictly through referrals.

"Some of our current clients have been with us from Day 1," she said. "Some have outgrown us, and needed more capabilities than we can provide, but we're proud that we helped them reach their goals."

After two years, she knew she needed help running the business, so her husband, Andrew, joined her as co-principal in Clay Pot. His background in statistics brings a practical perspective to website functionality as well as the ability to monitor and quantify the effectiveness of clients' marketing efforts. A year later they added a full-time art director, who used to be one of their subcontractors.

The couple moved the business out of



Krista Watzel, Northern Colorado Business Report

**COUPLE OF CREATIVES** — Andy and Julia Leach, co-principals of Clay Pot Creative in Fort Collins, founded the marketing firm to offer clients something beyond "cookie-cutter" solutions.

**"Some of our current clients have been with us from Day 1."**

Julia Leach, co-principal  
Clay Pot Creative

their house into a bigger office on Drake Road in Fort Collins three years ago, not

## MERCURY

100

**No. 1, Revenues \$2 million and under**

only to add more services and a more professional location, but also to help them separate work from family life. The firm now employs seven professionals and serves about 50 clients across the country each year, with about 10 to 20 projects in the works at any one time.

The Great Recession has hit many of Clay Pot's clients and competitors hard, precisely because they are small to medium-sized businesses.

"The recession changed the rules," Leach said. "It redefined how they did business and how they presented themselves. Expectations have changed, and the standard plan won't cut it anymore.

It's forced us to be even more creative."

She said some clients reacted by cutting their marketing budget in half, and others asked, "What if I double my budget while everyone else is cutting theirs?"

Things seem to be picking up since the first of the year, according to Leach, and while the Clay Pot team has had no layoffs during the downturn, there have been gaps in the production schedule. Leach said to keep busy, they have concentrated on pro bono work, to give back to the community as well as to show "we could keep strong and grow in a recession."

It seems to be working.