

## **Fair Traded, Shade Grown and Organic – The Fifth Pillar**

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

It is sometime close to eight fifteen in the morning when our sales manager, Bill, unlocks the door, fires up his computer, and begins brewing the first of several pots of coffee the staff will soon consume. As the coffee machine sputters and burbles, Bill scans his emails, listens to phone messages and begins his daily hotlist to-dos for clients and resellers. As we work in the Pacific Time zone, communication with the rest of North America is an early morning priority. The East Coast tends to take lunch around the same time those of us out west are ingesting our first cups of java.

Bill has a long day ahead of him. He is often the first live-voice callers hear when they dial into our office. If those callers wish to become clients, he is the person charged with explaining our services and helping mix and match those services into a coherent, client-specific search marketing campaign. Between his desk and those of his sales associates, at least a dozen complicated deals are being worked out at any given time. Bill makes stronger coffee than any other staff member.

Our office, (Fort Forth), is built on a multi-pillared foundation consisting of sales, administration, news and research, and production. Each pillar is anchored through this architecture and though some are more prominent, none could stand without the support of the others. Collectively, they keep the roof above our heads, so to speak.

As Bill prioritizes his communication schedule, the coffee machine coughs out the last few drips into its falsely labeled "ten-cup" carafe. Before dialing a digit, Bill pours himself eight ounces of liquid nitro, topped with an ounce of light cream. It's almost time to talk shop. First, he has to finish reviewing overnight emails, check his calendar and direct various emails to the proper recipients, some of whom should be coming through the door any second.

Who comes in next depends on the day. The majority of the staff work from their home offices. Geographically, Victoria BC is a very small city. All but one of our staff live within an eight block radius of the central downtown office, and each of us who can prefer to telecommute, meeting at the office or for lunch when necessary.

On Mondays, Thursdays or Fridays, I am usually the next one in. It's my job to keep the company up to date by following as many techniques, technologies, trends, tangents and trajectories as possible. In order to stay ahead of other SEO firms, I get paid to simply stay on top of developments, conduct extensive research, theorize and explain. I spend a lot of time talking (or typing) to our developers, the sales staff, and our head SEO, Scott Van Achte.

Being paid to think, teach and write has got to be one of the sweetest gigs in search marketing. Often, I write lengthy and colourful explanations of ideas (my own or other people's) that get published to the SEO Blog and republished across hundreds of other search marketing related sites. Though I do get the challenge of the occasional difficult consultancy contract, my work as a hands-on SEO has become secondary to my role of researcher and writer. It is an uncanny and obviously intimidating responsibility.

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I write the columns that get sent directly to about three dozen larger web publishers and am thus responsible for making that essential first pot of coffee myself.

The philosophy at the Forth dictates we demystify our industry as much as humanly possible in order to, move SEO towards greater acceptance as a mainstream marketing channel, and to ensure our clients fully understand what we are doing and where we are coming from. These are two important points for the next guy walking through the door, our CEO, Ross Dunn.

Ross founded the firm nine years ago while working as a photographer at the Whistler Ski Resort near Vancouver. Like many of the earliest SEOs, Ross came across the industry by chance when he and a friend who owned a local business were discussing a web site Ross was going to build. Though the web was slightly simpler in 1997, a limited number of people knew how to work on it. Back then; Ross was a computer hobbyist with a college certificate in Adventure Tourism Business Management and a keen sense of foresight. While working on his friend's site, Ross came across the late Jim Wilson's SEO forum, read a lot and applied what he had learned to the project at hand. When the site debuted high in the search rankings, Ross knew he was on to something extremely interesting and formed the first of three companies that would eventually merge to become StepForth.

Today, Ross has a lot on his mind. It is just about 9:00 AM and he has been up half the night messing around with ClickTracks, our new soon to be implemented electronic survey system, our website, or simply researching. Ross spends a lot of time researching his way through the multiple streams of data he tracks for each of his clients.

Along with heading the company and doing the administration tasks only an owner can do, Ross personally handles the high end of analytical data mining and consultancy work, bringing nine years of experience and his skills as a researcher to bear on the increasingly convoluted issues presented by corporate level SEO campaigns.

When Ross the Boss comes into the office, it is generally considered polite (as well as purely rational) to ensure there is at least one fresh cup of coffee in the pot. If there isn't, the staff has two immediate problems. First we have a disappointed boss, which is never a good way to start the day. Second and more importantly, Ross prefers a less substantial, sometimes translucent, brew, presenting an even greater problem for the staff that has to drink it before brewing another pot.

As it happens, Mark, lead designer of our Pure Ignition site development division, almost always follows Ross into the office, arriving mere minutes after the last cup is poured from the first pot. Mark has somehow found a way to brew a pot of coffee that is the perfect medium between the jet-fuel preferred by the sales and news/research departments, and the mellower styling of Ross, the ultimate administrator.

Mark had a hands-on tutorial on how to balance the demands of the staff against the realities of management. Though he was originally hired as an assistant SEO his sense of meticulousness and organization, combined with his bookkeeping abilities and the fact that he already knew the company, made him the perfect candidate for office manager when the internal position became available.

The tasks of the office manager, at least in a fast-paced SEO shop, are among the most thankless and irritating imaginable. Mark handled everything from billing to contracts to keeping the rest of us in line and focused. His diplomatic skills are second only to his design skills and as the second year in his role of ringmaster approached, it became obvious to everyone that Mark needed to start coding again.

Fortunately for Mark and the firm, his need to shift roles coincided with one of the greatest shifts in Google's algorithms, the Jagger Update.

Jagger has made site usability and architecture more important factors in achieving strong search engine placements. Our sales manager had noted months ago that he had to turn away an increasing number of potential clients because their sites were simply not ready for search engine optimization and we didn't have a design division. Shifting Mark's energies into a new division of the company where his design skills were needed and his administrative talents would prove crucial was presented as the perfect solution.

Shifting Mark also helped with the quality of coffee in the office. Now that he no longer runs the office, he can show up a few minutes later than he used to, if at all. That means the Ross will always get the third (and last) cup in the "ten-cup" coffee pot every morning and will not have to brew another pot, leaving it up to myself or Bill, or one of his sales associates to keep the coffee strong.

The last pillar-person on our team never comes into the office at all. Our Head SEO, Scott Van Achte, recently moved nearly 1,000 miles north to the tiny community of Dease Lake BC so his wife could pursue her career as a schoolteacher. Scott has to telecommute but through the miracles of modern technology is actually capable of doing more in a day without the distractions of a busy, coffee charged office atmosphere.

Scott is a long-term SEO with almost five years of experience behind him. Having graduated from the University of Victoria's incredibly challenging Advanced Information Technology Management (AMIT) course, his original job at StepForth was the stepping-stone to a promising career as a search marketing specialist. Scott now juggles responsibility for dozens of clients. Known for his mellow attitude, absolute lack of pretension, and his ability to read code like other people read prose; Scott is the only person to ever have worked for the firm who does not drink coffee. Perhaps it is fitting he is also the only one who, as a rule, almost never comes into the office.

By the end of the day, the coffee machine will have made at least four fresh brews. The staff will be wide awake all day, though Bill or myself might require assistance being peeled off the ceiling around closing time. While we all work on computers, the hardest working machine in any tech office is almost always the coffee machine. In our office, the four pillars might be anchored in the foundation of the company but that foundation is supported by a 24" tall "ten-cup" brew-master. No wonder days at the office pass so fast.