

Ahead

Of The Curve

How Michael & Susan Singleton Transformed Sagebrush Fine Art Into A Trendsetting Publisher

◀ A husband-and-wife team, Michael and Susan Singleton started Sagebrush Fine Art from their home about 20 years ago. Michael handles most of the sales, and Susan oversees public relations, collections and product development.

▼ The Sagebrush Fine Art crew gathers in front of the company's headquarters building. With such a small group, every employee is critical to the success of the company, Michael Singleton says. Pictured from left: Amalia Garcia, Connie Brent, Dalia Lopez, Ann Bezdjian, Deana Peat, Christopher Bird, Robyn Marshall, Michael Singleton, Susan Singleton, David Wright, Meili Shepherd, Shannon Curtis, Pansy Peters and Stephanie Marrott. Not pictured: Cory Jensen.

"Our company would not be where it is today without our wonderful, hardworking employees."

—Michael Singleton

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(photos on this page by Steve Tregear/gle photography)



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Occasionally on Monday mornings, Michael Singleton, co-owner of Sagebrush Fine Art, rounds up the troops for a staff meeting.

The 15 or so employees—among them Michael's wife and business partner, Susan—settle into couches and cushy chairs in the lobby area of the company headquarters and chat about their lives and what happened over the weekend. Then, Michael usually shares some kind of motivational tidbit—a quote from a successful entrepreneur or a passage from a book, such as "Don't Sweat The Small Stuff."

There's no number crunching or agenda setting. The gatherings center more on team building and strengthening the bond between an already close-knit crew.

Since its inception, Sagebrush Fine Art (named after Michael and Susan's first of three daughters, Sage) has operated on family values and a strong determination to rise to the top, no matter how many people were involved in getting there.

"The foundation of this company truly reflects the American dream," Michael says. "It grew from hard work." And, it continues to do so today.

Getting Off The Ground

Susan and Michael Singleton started Sagebrush Fine Art out of their home in 1990. Both had previous experience in art publishing, and they were ready to branch out on their own.

The first several years were a struggle, though, as they tried to establish the business and make ends meet with their budding family. Michael worked overtime, and Susan waited tables four nights a week. They were so hard up for cash at one point, Susan got upset with Michael for buying her flowers because the money could have gone toward groceries.

"We would dance around the fax when an art order came through," Susan says.

Determined to make Sagebrush work, they pressed forward. With the help of family members, the couple created the first company catalog in assembly line fashion on a banquet table



▲ A bird's-eye view of Sagebrush's 20,000-square-foot facility

in their living room. The piece consisted of collated postcard-sized pamphlets featuring the 10 artists Sagebrush represented at the time.

For several years, the company glided along on what it had been offering from the get-go: fine art. In search of new sales opportunities, the Singletons examined the consumer market for other ways to cash in. They discovered that country/primitive icons were hot, and they thought the stuffed animals would translate well to the poster market. Abandoning gallery-style art, they signed artists that specialized in homespun, hang-in-the-kitchen-type images more commonly found in boutiques, and the move proved to be a pivotal point for Sagebrush.

Sales skyrocketed, and the Singletons' initial fears of switching genres dissolved as they realized they were giving the mass-market exactly what it wanted. The newfound focus formed a distinct niche for Sagebrush, one that held firm for years to come.

"For a long time, we were branded as country cutesy—offering images of teddy bears and angels and so on," Michael says.

Success continued as the Singletons expanded on the same-style offerings and incorporated smaller-than-standard-sized posters into the mix. In 2000, they reinvented Sagebrush again. They signed on artist Michael Humphries and "directed him to paint a more sophisticated country look, with old antiques

Ahead Of The Curve SAGEBRUSH FINE ART

► Michael and Susan Singleton at work in their offices



▲ This display in the Sagebrush office showcases some of the company's licensing items. The cat is one of two adopted pets that roam around the office.

and wagons” at the forefront, Michael says. “This opened my eyes to a broader spectrum of possibilities,” he adds, and Sagebrush continued to grow.

One Of The Big Guys

In recent years, major retailers like Bed, Bath & Beyond and Linens ‘n Things have been calling Sagebrush directly for art.

A major trendsetter in the art market, Sagebrush has become one of the go-to publishers for constant and ahead-of-the-curve consumer-pleasing images.

“We have really become an art resource company,” Michael says.

One of the company's secret weapons: the mostly female staff. “The consumer typically is a woman picking art for the house, so it only makes sense to have female input at the product development level,” Susan says. As it turns out, many of the company's top-selling artists are also women.

Inspirational, message-bearing signs by Stephanie Marrott fall into one of the top categories, and Susan doesn't see that going away any time soon. “I don't think there's a shelf life on a great little message,” she says. “The signs have hung on for a



◀ Amalia Garcia prepares a poster shipment for a Sagebrush customer.

long time.” (Sagebrush is even releasing signs in Spanish to serve another demographic.)

Michael also attributes Sagebrush's success to strong relationships with customers. “Our company's primary focus is to please the customers and build lasting relationships,” he says. “There are so many wonderful people we have grown to know over the years. There are several buyers we have worked with from the beginning. We really feel that business is built upon good relationships.”

The Singletons' constant hunt for new images is another reason they've gotten ahead. “We have a weekly art-review meeting during which we go over submissions,” Susan says. “Some are solicitations, some new pieces from existing artists. Michael and I also go to tons of art festivals where we view original work and have found some tremendous talents.”

Art licensing is another strength. Because the company's wide variety of imagery lends itself to many applications, it currently licenses a wide variety to more than 75 manufacturers in the home-decor and gift industries.

Part of what puts the company so far ahead in this area: Sagebrush doesn't manufacture home-decor items like mugs and bath towels, but it superimposes its artists' images on them for presentation purposes. Just like furnishing a display home, the buyer's ability to see a final product usually increases sales. “Instead of sending a poster, the presentation puts us leaps

and bounds ahead of everyone else,” Susan says.

As the company moves forward into the future, there's no doubt it will continue to stay that way. □



◀ Pansy Peters, a Sagebrush sales representative, sifts through prints in the warehouse to fulfill a customer's order.