

Team-building firms create bonding business

Sand castles, sailing and missions to Mars among offerings

BY LAURIE BURKITT

EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES CONTRIBUTOR

Divorce, sand and corporate team building – these are three things that seemingly have nothing in common, but for professional sand carver Kirk Rademaker, they were the key ingredients to his career.

In 1997, Rademaker headed to the beach. The rolling waves, the soothing sound of the water and the white foam against the earth sheltered him from all the legal and relationship battles occurring within his private life. And playing in the sand made him feel carefree and childlike.

Building sand castles became a ritual, and day after day the creations became more elaborate, more detailed and more artistic. After a few years, what had started out as a therapeutic coping mechanism for his divorce turned into a business.

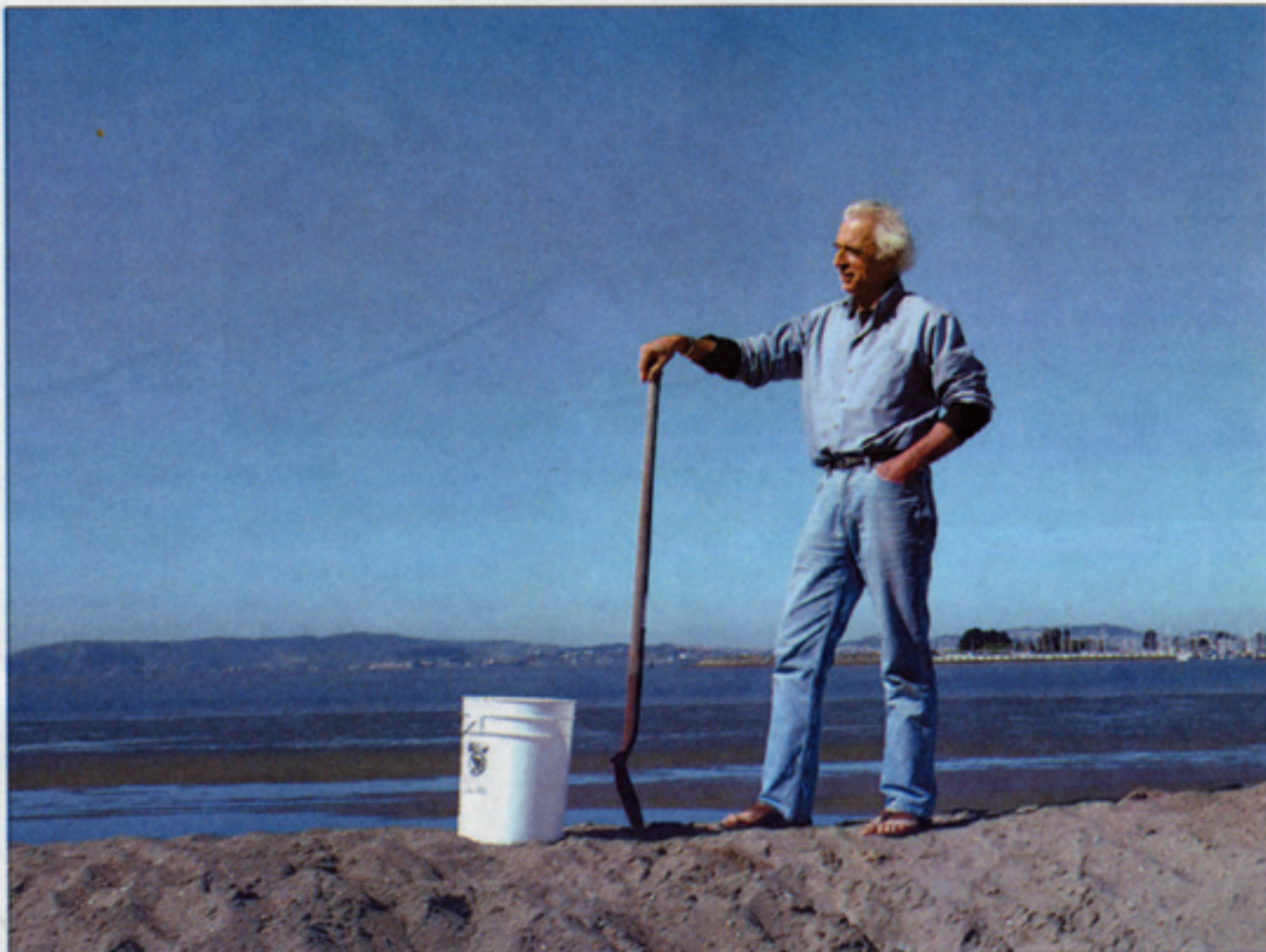
"I realized that the beach has a way of opening people up," said Rademaker. "It dawned on me – this would be a great way to help corporations. Just take them to the beach."

Since 2000, when he began operations in Oakland, Rademaker has been teaching employees at corporations such as Genentech Inc., Vocent Solutions Inc. and Gap Inc. how to carve more than ordinary sand castles. Teams of 10 to 25 people are equipped with buckets and shovels, and they learn to master the consistency of their building materials: sand and water. They slice to form staircases, indent to add style.

"Sand is tricky stuff," said Rademaker, who hosts around 30 corporate events a year. Corporations pay \$1,000 to \$2,500 for each event, pick the beaches they want, and Rademaker meets them there with a crew of sand technicians. It's a good business, he said, overhead costs are low, but the work schedule can be unreliable. Summer months are bustling, but the rest of the year can be a little tough.

For most of the East Bay's corporate team-building enterprises, reliable business and full schedules roll in and out with the tides of corporate trends. Cynthia Shon started Pleasanton's Corporate Games Inc. in 1991 and has seen that when the economy slows, so does the corporate world, and so does her business. But that isn't always the case.

"After Sept. 11, my business actually picked up," said Shon. Companies realized the significance



Stephanie Secret | East Bay Business Times

Above: Kirk Rademaker, aka The Sand Guy, has created a business around teaching employees at companies, including Genentech Inc. and Gap Inc., how to build sand castles.

of ensuring good inter-company communications and relationships. Unlike Rademaker's, Shon's team-building tactics are more game-related. She travels to companies and hosts games that require employees to further develop their communication.

One of her favorite games asks people to work together to build a sturdy cardboard bridge that will support the weight of three team members.

"Cardboard is stronger than you think," Shon said. "But it takes a while for game players to figure out how to cooperate with one another and make it work."

Communication is the basis for Anthony Sandberg's Olympic Circle Sailing Club. His clients – including The Clorox Co., Bayer Corp., Pixar Animation Studios and Apple Inc. – bring their employees out to the company's 40-foot yachts on the Bay and encourage them to learn how to sail.

"There's no way you could sail even a 20-foot boat alone," said Sandberg. The people have to learn sailing skills and how to communicate with one another if

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Anthony Sandberg
Director, Olympic Circle Sailing Club

GAMES, PAGE 18



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GAMES: Playing helps create more cooperation

FROM PAGE 17

they want to move beyond the docks.

What's entertaining, said Sandberg, is to see people who are very formal with one another at the beginning of the day suddenly become more comfortable with one another. "By the end of the day, they are holding up hands for a high-five," said Sandberg.

Clients tend to become repeat customers because they learn to love sailing and see the benefits of it, Sandberg said. As a result, the company is thriving and has been growing for the past few years at a 10 percent rate.

"We're bucking the trend," said Sandberg. "In an industry where team building is shrinking, we're actually growing. What started out as me and a boat in 1979 has become 80 employees and 50 yachts.

The Chabot Space & Science Center, which hosts virtual missions to the moon and Mars, is expanding its corporate team-building division as well. On average, the center hosts 10 to 15 events each year at a cost of \$2,500 to \$3,500. Since the proceeds go to space education and exploration, companies typically feel that this is a way to give back to the community while strengthening their teams.

Kaiser Permanente, Pacific Gas & Electric Co., and Morgan Stanley have all participated in these simulated space flights. Teams are split and assigned as astronauts or as directors in the command control booth. Astronauts have to learn how to use robotic arms to fix problems outside of the space shuttle. Commanders have to relay directions on what to do when the spacecraft runs out of oxygen.

"It's all communication," said Sharon Fletcher, director of team games at Chabot. "We take it very seriously."

Employees think they'll just be coming to have fun but learn that even playing space center is as challenging as what they face on a daily basis at work.

For team-building businesses, these games are a way of life, a way to make a living. They are serious and make significant changes in the way employees interact and work. But they are also just plain fun.

"I get to have the time of my life," said Rademaker. After seven years of building sand castles for a living, "the novelty still hasn't worn off."

Team building opportunities in the East Bay



Berkeley Ironworks

800 Potter St.
Berkeley 94710
Phone: 510-981-9900
E-mail: contact2@berkeley-ironworks.com
Web: www.touchstoneclimbing.com/bi.html

Berkeley Ironworks is a rock-climbing gym that offers corporate groups instruction and experience in rock climbing, bouldering and belaying.

Chabot Space & Science Center

10,000 Skyline Blvd.
Oakland 94619
Phone: 510-336-7421
E-mail: rentals@chabot.space.org
Web: www.chabot.space.org

Chabot Space & Science Center creates simulated space flights to the moon and Mars that groups can participate in.

City Beach

4020 Technology Place
Fremont 94538
Phone: 510-651-2500

E-mail: events@citybeach.com
Web: www.citybeach.com

City Beach hosts a variety of team-building events, including an indoor ropes course and sumo wrestling.



Corporate Games

5820 Stoneridge Mall Road
Suite 100
Pleasanton 94588
Phone: 925-249-0669
E-mail: info@corpgames.com
Web: www.corporategames.com

Corporate Games organizes team-building games and activ-

ities, ranging from reality game takeoffs of "Survivor" and "The Apprentice" to treasure hunts and musical competitions.

OCSC Sailing

One Spinnaker Way
Berkeley 94710
Phone: 510-843-4200
E-mail: henry@ocsc-sailing.com
Web: www.ocscsailing.com

OCSC provides structured training in leadership and team building through sailing.

Plan-It Interactive

110 Second Ave. South
Suite A2
Pacheco 94553
Phone: 925-680-6929
E-mail: skip@interactivegame.com
Web: www.interactivegame.com

From laser tag and bathtub races to batting cages and sumo wrestling, Plan-It Interactive supplies the goods to make games happen.

Kirk Rademaker

Phone: 510-459-9469
E-mail: kirk@sandguy.com
Web: www.kirkrademaker.com

Kirk Rademaker creates team building events around sand castle construction.

Touchstone Concord

1220 Diamond Way, No. 140
Concord 94520
Phone: 925.602.1000

E-mail: contact2concord@touchstoneclimbing.com
Web: www.touchstoneclimbing.com/cd.html



Touchstone Concord is a rock-climbing gym that offers corporate groups instruction and experience in rock climbing, bouldering and belaying.

USS Hornet

Pier 3, Alameda Point
Alameda 94501
Phone: 707-307-4500
E-mail: sales@totaladventures.com
Web: www.totaladventures.com

Total Adventures organizes three team-building and interactive experiences aboard the USS Hornet, including an interactive scavenger hunt.

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Photos: Corporate Games supplies equipment to companies for parties and team-building events.