

## Full-Service Ad Agency Based in San Francisco



**Tom Geary - CEO**

### **About School of Thought**

School of Thought is a full-service ad agency based in San Francisco. Co-founders Tom Geary and Joseph Newfield are award-winning creative directors who will use every means necessary — social, print, outdoor, digital, TV, video, guerrilla, experiential efforts — to move the needle for their clients.

The agency's clients include North Lake Tahoe, Red Bull, Milliman, iShares and Budweiser.

Today, a team of exceptional people joins them on the third floor of a really charming brick building that made it through the '06 quake without a scratch. So it should be able to handle an advertising agency.

**Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine**

### **CEOCFO: Mr. Geary, what is School of Thought?**

**Mr. Geary:** School of Thought is an ad agency in San Francisco. We started in 2008 because our sense of timing is so good.

### **CEOCFO: How did you come up with the name?**

**Mr. Geary:** One of the big reasons to hire an ad agency is to gain perspective. In this case, we had none. We worked and worked and came up with about 200 names, and 190 of them were simply terrible.

One day, I was taking a much-needed golf lesson. The instructor was commenting on one aspect of the game—it may have been chipping, I can't recall. She said there were a few "schools of thought" on the technique. I wrote the phrase down. The name immediately rang true. It's exactly how we work—we try to be very thoughtful about how we do our work as a creatively driven ad agency.

### **CEOCFO: How do you match up creativity, thoughtfulness, trendiness and client needs? What is the key to being a successful agency?**

**Mr. Geary:** Like any relationship, not every agency is right for every client. I think we are well suited for challenger brands. Not just startups, but companies that are not happy with where they are in the market...with how they are positioned...with the status quo. We typically work with brands that are not a category leader, sometimes the number two or three in the market. They typically cannot afford to outspend, so they need to be nimble and outmaneuver the competition. That is our perfect fit. Not necessarily the mature brands, but the brands that are looking to shake things up.

I also think it is important to work with people who value marketing and the power of their brand. It may be surprising, but we sometimes find people in marketing roles who are content with, say, relying entirely on distribution or discounting. There's an enormous opportunity cost—and lost revenue—to that approach, but it's hard to make that case with somebody who doesn't value branding.

### **CEOCFO: Are you typically working on a full campaign?**

**Mr. Geary:** Most of the time we get to handle the entire campaign, soup to nuts. We started out as a creative boutique, meaning just working on the messaging, which makes sense in that Joe, my partner, and I are both creative directors. We grew the shop out because we realized that by having more control over the entire campaign...by including media planning and strategy into the mix, we would have a much better likelihood of success. Now we have a complete full service agency with the opportunity to affect everything: from the media plan and brand strategy to campaign analytics. By having all of these tools at our disposal, we can really affect success. Any time that we have been given a specific goal, we have beat it. There's more accountability that comes with working on the entire campaign rather than just a piece of it.

**CEOCFO: When you are working with a client and you are assessing what to do and how to go, what might be some of the things you look at in the mix that perhaps other agencies would not think are important?**

**Mr. Geary:** We say we're not here to tell our clients what they want to hear, but what they need to hear. An outside perspective is so important. I have worked in-house at companies like Adobe and others, and when you are on a team, you inherently lose perspective. It's just impossible to look at things objectively, when one is inside the bubble. That's why in-house agencies seldom do the best work.

That's also why we back up and look at the client's position objectively. Anything less, would be a disservice. Next, we make sure the consumer is at the table. The client has their perspective, and so do we. Yet the most important part of the equation is the target audience. Will the offering meet their needs? Will this ad resonate with the target? You can't go wrong, when you ask these kinds of questions.

In terms of the tactics: I am a big fan of work that is arresting and distinctive. I think one of the biggest mistakes that people make with their advertising is that they presume interest. They presume people are going to look at their advertising, and we do just the opposite. We presume disinterest and then work to overcome it. We come up with things that are arresting, and we also make sure that our ads stand out in the category. The ads, the media plan, the strategy—what can we do that no one else has done? It is a combination of the arresting messaging and distinctive strategy and tactics that really set brands apart.

**“[The brand] has a tremendous effect on the business, so I think I am always interested in reminding people that the brand is probably the most important aspect of your business that you are not thinking about.” - Tom Geary**

The other thing that I like to say to clients is that I liken advertising and the whole marketing plan to a stock portfolio. You can have something incredibly bland...a homogenized mix, or you can have a diverse portfolio with some things that are low risk and a few things that are higher risk. It is those higher risk opportunities, perhaps five or 10 percent of your communications portfolio that have an incredible opportunity for success. Case in point. I was working on Microsoft's search engine, before Bing, and they were really struggling. Our clients were desperate for a hit, and the gloves came off. We could do anything, they said. So we came up with this idea of personifying the search engine, in effect, literally bringing search to life. This was before Siri, I should mention. We filmed 600 video scenes featuring this incredible hostess, Ms. Dewey, and then linked them to every imaginable search term using artificial intelligence. We launched this thing without any advertising, just as an engaging content play. They ended up getting 50 million hits and about 5,000 PR mentions, including coverage on Donny Deutsch's The Big Idea. Arguably, it was Microsoft's biggest success in search, and it would not have occurred had it not been for somebody loosening the reins, placing a very small bet on a new kind of content.

**CEOCFO: When you are evaluating, how do you take into account what is trendy but what does not really sit well with you?**

**Mr. Geary:** Commercial directors have a point of view. Sometimes these commercial directors are the same people competing for the feature films. I think this affects some of the trends in casting, the humor, and the look and feel. People like to have characters that are more real now, and I think in general that is a great thing.

I do have some visceral reactions to trends, to the flavors of the month, and there are some things make me wince. Social media of course is such an incredible phenomenon, and it is legitimate, but I think there has been something of an overreaction in that people think everything should be all about social media.

I think the best advertising has always been social—long before Facebook was around, we were trying to create content that people wanted to share. It's about making an emotional connection, about aiming to create something so great, it has to be passed along. The notion that adding a hashtag onto one's campaign is going to suddenly make it relevant is one trend that absolutely makes me wince. You should focus on having a great campaign first, having content that people want to see, and then add the socialization to it. That is much better than the reverse.

**CEOCFO: How do clients find you and how do you reach out?**

**Mr. Geary:** We are a small shop, only recently getting more on the radar. We won a number of awards for our work for North Lake Tahoe, and suddenly the phone has started to ring. We also have a business development person, and she does a great job engaging with prospects. Now, as I said, we are blessed to have the phone ringing more than not. That's rewarding.

**CEOCFO: Are you able to handle all that comes your way or will you need to add to your staff and be more selective on projects?**

**Mr. Geary:** I am always struck by this notion that big brands need big agencies, and I think it's a fallacy. In just about every big shop that I have ever worked with, the reality was that a handful of people worked on the account. On Microsoft,

a handful of us handled about \$100 million worth of advertising. Now, we've grabbed a handful or two of the very best people and brought them to School of Thought. We have not had any problems scaling. We have been growing consistently 20 to 30 percent of the year, and we have a great team of regular freelancers that we bring in whenever new clients come on board. They augment the team, and then we staff up in parallel. It has not really been a problem growing. What's important to us, though, is that we protect our small agency culture. We want to have the very best people here, people who are good fit for a small agency because the teamwork is absolutely critical to the success of this place. It is not really a question of meeting the clients' needs—if we can keep this great team gelling, and I think we've got the best team we've ever had, right now, I'm sure everything else will work out.

**CEOCFO: *What has surprised you as the business has developed?***

**Mr. Geary:** I am not sure marketers are as savvy as they used to be. I think that many advertisers as perhaps doing more with less. There are fewer resources client side. I am sometimes amazed that people move to senior levels of brand management and do not have much of a marketing foundation or interest in the brand. That has kind of been a shock for me. That happens with technology firms sometimes. You get certain engineers who migrate and become marketers, and I'm not sure that's best.

**CEOCFO: *What is next for School of Thought?***

**Mr. Geary:** We are bursting at the seams in our current office, so we are trying to manage the growth well, and as I said, trying to grow the place in a way that does not change the character. It is important to us to get the right people here, and it is important for us to get the right clients so that we can keep the balance. We are really trying to make this a place where the clients get the best work possible and that the team comes first. That is something that is rare in advertising, to have a focus on the team. Everywhere I've ever worked, the people are treated like cogs, entirely an afterthought, and that is not what we want here. We are just trying to manage the growth and keep our eye on the ball.

**CEOCFO: *Put it together, why School of Thought?***

**Mr. Geary:** The thing about School of Thought is that we have put together a pretty extraordinary combination of creativity and conscious accountability. People here are not going to stop until we move the needle for our clients. Contrast that with many creative shops, where there's no larger strategy, just creativity for creativity's sake. That is not what we do. We can defend every idea we come up with: there's always a reason, a method to the madness. And that's why we've always beaten every goal we've been given. So whenever we are given a specific goal, we have absolutely crushed it. So have a goal.

**CEOCFO: *Final thoughts?***

**Mr. Geary:** I think one of the challenges in general with advertising has to do with the value of the brand. In a magazine with CFO in the title, brands are hard to quantify. It is not on the balance sheet and it is an intangible asset. What I think is really important, and what few people think about, is the opportunity cost when the brand or marketing is weak. People do not think about the effect of a weak brand, but it could have a tremendous effect on the business. If the store buyer does not return your call or the request for proposal does not come to the desk, you are never going to know about that opportunity cost. It has a tremendous effect on the business, so I think I am always interested in reminding people that the brand is probably the most important aspect of your business that you are not thinking about.

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**BIO:** Tom's writing career began at the tender age of ten, publishing a tiny newspaper in Fiji that cost 10 cents to produce. Selling them for 10 cents each didn't rake in the profits, but he caught the entrepreneurial bug, and hasn't recovered since.

In the ensuing years, he's worked at some of the world's best ad agencies, working on more than one hundred brands, including Apple, Microsoft, HP, iShares, Disney and Red Bull.

In 2008, Tom partnered with Joe Newfield to create the most effective campaign in Hawaiian tourism history. Shortly thereafter, they founded School of Thought.

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