



Enter(e)Prizing

Alumni Rebecca Bolton, AB '02/MBA '07, and Mark Staples, MBA '01, Bring Strategy Expertise to Online Promotions

By Terry Kosdrosky // Photos by C.J. Benninger

Sometimes the risk of a mid-career change is its own reward. Two Ross alumni have taken that risk and leveraged their MBAs to secure a sweet spot in the advertising and marketing world — a rare occurrence these days. Though advertisers and ad agencies are cutting budgets, online promotions firm ePrize LLC is poised to benefit from the disruption as dollars shift from traditional print and broadcast media to the Web.

Rebecca Bolton, AB '02/MBA '07, and **Mark Staples**, MBA '01, now are directing strategy at ePrize, creating innovative ways for some of the world's best-known names to connect with loyal customers and attract new ones. Based in the firm's Pleasant Ridge, Mich., headquarters, they are trusted to protect and elevate such brands as Coca-Cola, adidas, Yahoo!, Gap, J. Crew, Microsoft, AT&T, HBO, and The Home Depot.

Prior to ePrize Bolton worked as an account manager for a large advertising agency: a good job, but it lacked the creativity she craved. Staples ran a trading desk on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and worked for big-name finance firms like Northern Trust.

Now both reap professional rewards working in this smaller, nimble firm. For example, Bolton and Staples just worked with ePrize's innovation team to connect the company's products to Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace.

"About a year ago Mark and I felt we didn't have enough offerings for social media, so we formed a team to develop social media solutions for our clients," says Bolton, senior manager of strategic services. "Numerous products were launched as a result of our interest, which we may not have had the opportunity to do at a larger company."



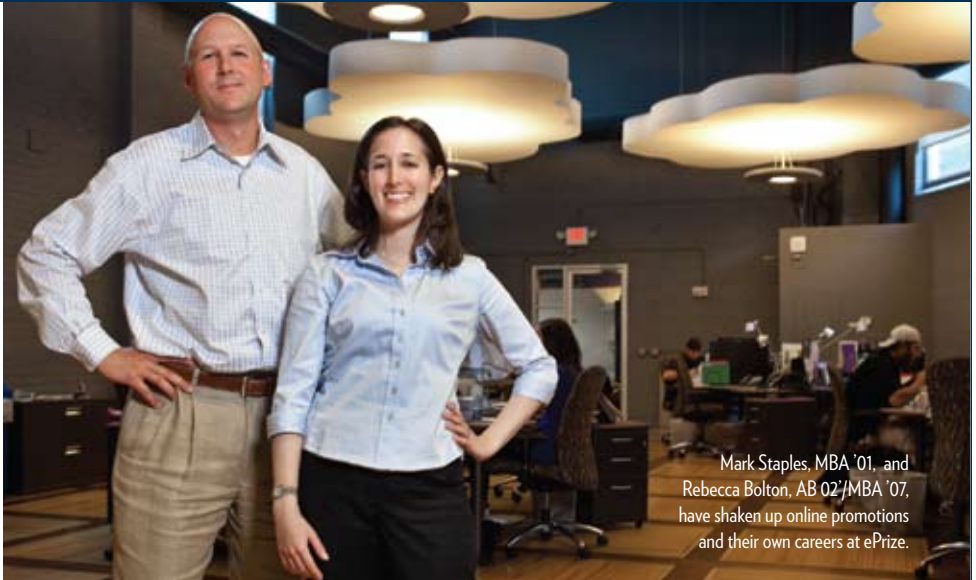
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THAT'S THE TICKET Typically Bolton and Staples will visit a client company and really dig into that particular industry and brand. Then they'll lock down the client's real objective and help develop the best interactive campaign, be it a contest, a give-away, or a loyalty rewards program.

Next the plan is coordinated with the technical, legal, and creative groups at ePrize. So the job is part creative, part financial, part coordination, and part counselor to clients. Some companies provide very broad objectives ("I want to be in social media") or are married to a particular type of promotion, no matter the objective. In either case Bolton and Staples need to steer clients in the right direction.

"A lot of our job is asking the right questions and listening," Staples says of the team's ability to sense opportunities case by case. "Then it's coming back to our office to work with a diverse group to analyze the needed components and craft the ideal solution for the client."

Options run the gamut from high-profile consumer promotions and national loyalty programs to internal corporate incentive programs. In a Coke promotion that leveraged its partnership with TV ratings juggernaut *American Idol*, contestants submitted graphic designs to appear on judge Simon Cowell's beverage cup. The winning entry



Mark Staples, MBA '01, and Rebecca Bolton, AB 02/MBA '07, have shaken up online promotions and their own careers at ePrize.

underlying issues and identify key objectives, and what we did in business school prepares your brain to think that way."

TEN YEARS AFTER Today ePrize is 10 years old, and the technology and business models are still evolving. Bolton interned at ePrize between her first and second years at Ross and says three years later it's already transformed into a different company.

"What we do is always changing, and that's exciting," she says. "It's not the same job every day. It's a dynamic industry and we work with a diverse set of clients, so we are constantly presented with new challenges and opportunities."

cup design contest we did for *American Idol* with Coke, the winning design was on the show with Simon drinking out of that cup. That's an emotional tie to your brand that money can't buy, and it's very compelling."

And money spent on an ePrize program carries another value proposition. ePrize collects and analyzes customer data, which helps clients fine-tune the next promotion and gives executives a tangible return on investment. Client companies can view this data in real time.

"New media provides more bang for the buck than traditional media," Bolton says.

As ePrize has evolved from a promotions company to a full-service firm with a standardized approach to innovation, strategic thinkers like Bolton and Staples are in demand.

"Both Mark and Rebecca have the unique skill set of strong, diverse marketing acumen coupled with the ability to use both sides of their brain: analytical and creative," says Vice President of Strategic Services Matt Kates.

The opportunity to switch careers has landed Bolton and Staples not only in a good place in a struggling economy but also in a bright spot in a struggling area — metro Detroit. In a region suffering from the automotive industry fallout, ePrize stands out.

"When I mention I'm with ePrize, people are interested. They know about us," Staples says. "It feels nice being a positive light in the Detroit area in terms of a company that's growing and doing new, innovative things working with some of the top brands in the world." ✖

"It's a dynamic industry ... we are constantly presented with new challenges and opportunities."

was seen by millions of viewers worldwide whenever the controversial Cowell took a sip on camera. On the opposite end of the spectrum ePrize might lend expertise to a client who wants to run a contest to motivate its own sales force.

Despite the surge in social media, online marketing is an industry and job with plenty of challenges. Overall spending is down, clients have laid off staff, and there is more pressure than ever for ePrize to deliver tangible results at competitive rates.

"For me the Ross perspective brings critical thinking," says Staples, senior director of strategy. "It's about being able to uncover

These days the ePrize crew must be more agile than ever, as the economic downturn forces ongoing adjustments in the marketing game. The general focus for ePrize's clients has shifted from attracting new customers, which is expensive, toward the lower-cost option of retaining customers and driving more in-store traffic.

For ePrize that means more loyalty rewards programs coupled with promotions such as sweepstakes. "At a time when people are looking to switch to cheaper brands, rewards programs are a great way to get to know your customer and build a relationship with them," Staples says. "In the