

Alumni Profile: Sam Richter

Sell Mate

Sam Richter (B.A. '89) lists three books that he turns to again and again for inspiration: Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. Richter is a salesman first, last, and always. His specialty? Selling how to sell.

Richter came to the University of Minnesota from St. Louis Park (Minnesota) High School to play Gopher football under coach Lou Holtz. In 1986, the journalism major won an internship with WCCO Radio covering the Twins, one of the worst teams in baseball that season. Being an underdog is not Richter's style, so he veered into advertising—about the same time that the Twins went from worst to first and won the World Series.

But if his timing as a sports journalist was off, it was right on as a marketer. The Internet was just rewiring up when Richter signed on with a Minneapolis-based advertising firm helping clients sell products and services via Internet marketing. But it soon became apparent that his clients were more interested in his creativity and big-picture thinking and his charisma than merely creating Web content.

So, at age 25, he and a colleague opened their own agency. It was later bought by another firm, and Richter eventually figured out that what he was really selling was Sam Richter.

In 1997, while he was working at information technology firm Digital River, Richter founded SBR Worldwide (SBR stands for Small Business Resources) as a moonlight gig. The company caters to small businesses, attempting to give them the same competitive edge that big public relations firms give Fortune 500 companies. "Everyone told businesses, 'You have to have a Web site. You have to reach customers on the Internet.' But no one told them how to do it," says Richter, who sold them on how to do it.

The James J. Hill Reference Library in St. Paul was one such operation. Established in the early 1900s by the railroad baron as a resource for small businesses, the library kept a trove of business periodicals and books, serving approximately 12,000 visitors a year, but none of its resources were available online. The library's board lured Richter away from Digital River in 2001 with a small budget and a big challenge.

"I tried to convince small businesses that they needed information [about their industry and their competitors] and that they needed to pay for it," Richter says. Under his direction, the Hill Library created a membership program that gave individuals the same access to information and expert advice as big companies, a content management system that allowed the Hill Library to create custom business libraries online for clients, and boosted users to more than a million per year.

Richter—who was named to the *Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal* "40 Under 40" list, an annual roster of the region's rising young business stars, in 2003—left the Hill Library in December 2007 to join ActiFi, a Plymouth, Minnesota-based company that advises financial advisers on how to increase their sales. SBR Worldwide now manages Richter's services as a speaker, sales trainer, consultant, and author.

Author? Richter points to another book on his shelf, a relatively new addition to his collection and one that he hopes up-and-coming salespeople will turn to for inspiration: *Take the Cold out of Cold Calling*, by Sam Richter.

—Sarah Barker

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