

SMALL BUSINESS

Maker of coloring books turns page on success

Agreements with the likes of MeadWestvaco put the Clayton company on a growth spurt.

BY SHERA DALIN
Of the Post-Dispatch

The owner of Really Big Coloring Books Inc. would need several green crayons nowadays to color his financial statements.

For years, after he printed the first giant coloring books nearly 25 years ago, Wayne Bell of University City just piddled at the business. He was working full time as a salesman for directory printer R.L. Polk and Co. of Detroit. The coloring books were a sideline.

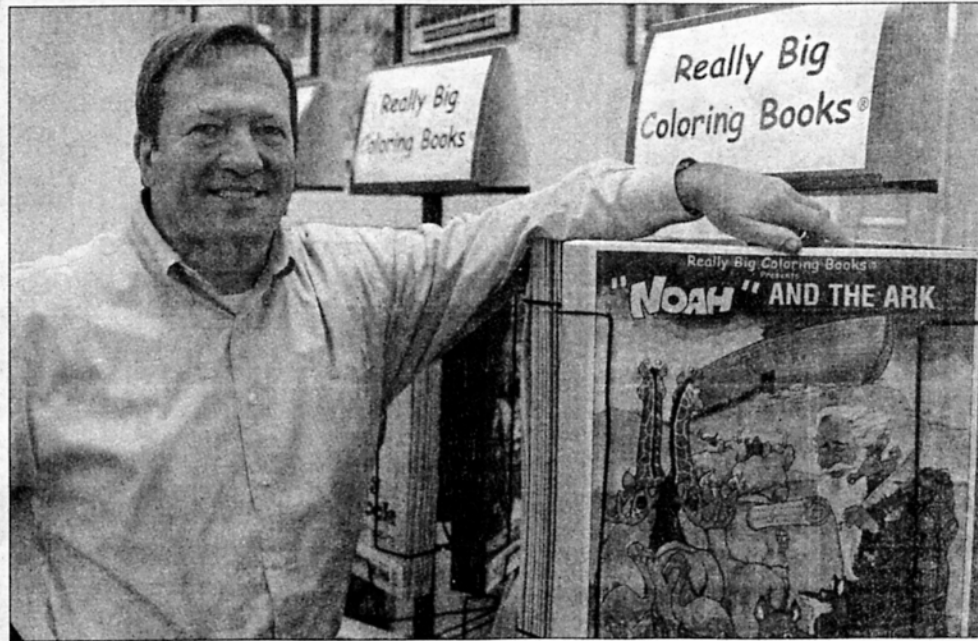
But after being downsized at Polk, he decided to devote more attention to Really Big Coloring Books.

Hitting the streets to round up sales, he began getting nonprofit and trade associations to buy large batches of the 18-inch-by-24-inch coloring books, written on themes that fit with their groups.

There was the "Great American Horse Book" for the American Quarterhorse Association and State Horse Councils Alliance. Meanwhile, the National Christmas Tree Association sold copies of " 'Twas The Night Before Christmas."

"I came from begging Christmas-tree sellers to buy 30 books to (printing) 335,000 books a year," Bell said.

The company publishes 31 titles in several languages. The books, which wholesale for about \$3.15 apiece, are sold in 15 countries, including the United States.



SAM LEONE / POST-DISPATCH

Really Big Coloring Books went from about \$50,000 in revenue in 2000 to a projected \$643,000 this year.

"I have totally worked my tail off to do it, but the success of this company has come from the people I have employed," said Bell, 45.

The company, based in Clayton,

evolved from no employees four years ago to six full-time workers and seven part-time workers — mostly artists, translators and writers. Bell took on a partner and chief operating officer, Ken Rich, who oversees daily operations.

Really Big Coloring Books has signed its biggest deal. It's a spon-

sorship agreement with a car-racing affiliate that calls for as many as 1.8 million books a year sold at grocers nationwide over three years. The contract could yield as much as \$5.8 million in corporate sponsorship and book sales that Really Big Coloring Books and its partner hope to bring in.

"I can't even sleep at night from excitement," Bell said.

Even without the racing deal, he projects 2005 revenue at \$2.4 million. Really Big Coloring Books signed an agreement in April with packaging and paper-maker MeadWestvaco Corp. of Stamford, Conn.

MeadWestvaco will print, distrib-

Wayne Bell, owner of Really Big Coloring Books, expects his company's 2005 revenue to more than double.

ute and market products from Really Big Coloring Books in a deal that will boost revenue by "hundreds of thousands of dollars," Bell said.

"When MeadWestvaco came knocking at our door, I was scared to death," he said.

The deal was far larger than anything Bell had handled.

But he has adjusted to the idea, and the giant leap in growth he anticipates will come from MeadWestvaco and its alliance with the Advertising Specialty Institute. The institute's members would be more large potential customers for coloring books branded with company names and logos.

Really Big Coloring Books will continue to be a distributor for Crayola crayons. Bell wholesales the crayons to small retailers that wouldn't normally have enough sales volume to qualify for an account with Crayola's maker, Binney & Smith.

Bell has been adding six new book titles a year for the last four years, a pace he expects to double next year.

"I want to be the coloring-book king of the world," Bell said. "I know it's kind of corny. But the only thing I like to do is run my mouth and sell really big coloring books."

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