

Well worth watching

10 enterprising individuals who Atlantic Business Magazine believes are well on their way to becoming household names

By Stephanie Porter

There's a lot to brag about in Atlantic Canada – and more than a few people you'll want to keep your eyes on. We've singled out 10 of them, representing a wide variety of industries, from biotech to hi-tech, wellness to beauty, caffeine to construction.

When asked about leadership, these fast-moving entrepreneurs were surprisingly similar in their answers; words like “empowerment” and “team building” came up again and again. These individuals have the spark, drive, and positive attitude to lead their teams steadily forward.

Read on for a quick glance at 10 business leaders to watch. And stay tuned! We predict you'll be hearing more about these men and women very soon.

Barb Stegemann

CEO, The 7 Virtues Beauty Inc.

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Nova Scotia-based Barb Stegemann uses uncommon scents to make the world a better place. The 7 Virtues Beauty, Inc., launched in June 2010, sources fair trade essential oils from countries in the process of rebuilding – including Afghanistan and Haiti – and blends them into fragrances available across Canada.

Stegemann's belief that "women can flex their buying power to effect change" inspires her bustling business. She is sought after for speaking engagements; her book, *The 7 Virtues of a Philosopher Queen*, is in its third edition.

In just two years, Stegemann's company has sold more than \$500,000 in fragrance in Canada. She credits her mentors and partners – particularly W. Brett Wilson, an investor Stegemann connected with when she successfully pitched her business on CBC-TV's *Dragon's Den* – for aiding her fast success.

Next up? Stegemann is focused on bringing her line to new markets in the UK, Europe, and the United States. The 7 Virtues will be at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games as part of an economic trade component, and Stegemann has already begun European media interviews and promotion. "None of this happens overnight," she says. "It takes relationships and nurturing and being innovative."



Jeff LeDrew

CEO & founder, Jumping Bean Coffee Inc.

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Jeff LeDrew's goal has always been to produce the perfect coffee. By importing fair trade, organic raw coffee beans, and roasting them locally using Jumping Bean's own technology, he's achieving that – and the marketplace is noticing. The company's annual revenue has jumped from \$2,000 in 2005 (the first year of business), to \$1.3 million in 2011. Jumping Bean coffee is listed in major Newfoundland grocery stores, over 100 smaller stores, and has four retail outlets in St. John's.

Along the way, LeDrew has invested \$600,000 in new technology. The resulting ECO₂Roast process produces 85 per cent fewer emissions than traditional roasting. That, says LeDrew, has given Jumping Bean the marketing advantage to go national, targeting the eco-conscious consumer – as well as "doing the right thing."

In 2012, the company will implement a franchise model, bringing its coffee and cafés to more Canadians. After locating a major franchisee in Ontario, and regional franchisees in Atlantic Canada, LeDrew plans to have at least five (and as many as 10) new locations within the next 12 months. It's part of LeDrew's "multi-program approach" to growth that includes Jumping Bean's popular fundraising programs, brokers, and distributors in new markets for food service, office supply, and retail.



John Atkins

President, John Atkins & Co (JAC)

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At 17, John Atkins started his first company, building customized computers and servers for business clients. His love of technology and entrepreneurship has never left: today, John Atkins & Co. (JAC) is a leader in online marketing and web design and development.

Four years ago, JAC started with one employee and one client. Within a year, Atkins had five employees and 50 clients. Today, Atkins manages 10 staff, a number of outside contractors and freelancers, and a roster of 200 clients. By year-end, Atkins expects another 100 clients, and formal expansion beyond Newfoundland. Locations in Halifax and Alberta are already in development and, Atkins says, the company is on track to double the amount of projects and revenue from last year.

In addition to Atkins' fearless and creative approach to the web, JAC is poised to make waves through the creation and launch of new online marketing and management tools, the details of which he's necessarily keeping close to his chest. "I'm not afraid to push the limits of what we do," Atkins says. "The web is organic, and you need to learn to adapt, change, and embrace it."

Sylvio LeBlanc

President and CEO, LeBlanc Custom Homes Inc.

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In 1994, while working as a long-haul truck driver, Sylvio LeBlanc decided to build his own house. The process – coordinating tradespeople, dealing with suppliers, creating the home he envisioned – was so satisfying he decided to make it his full-time job. In 2004, LeBlanc Custom Homes became a reality.

LeBlanc faced challenging times in the late 2000s, after a decision to enter the spec home market didn't pay off as planned. LeBlanc refocused his business and is now a leader in top-tier (he attracts clients "with unlimited funds") custom home construction in southeastern New Brunswick.

Growth has been steady since the restructuring: sales increased 15 per cent between 2009 and 2010, and another nine per cent in 2011, hitting "the sweet spot between \$3 million and \$4 million." LeBlanc expects over \$5 million in sales this year.

With a trusted group of local contractors and suppliers around him, LeBlanc moves steadily forward. "On some levels our business has exceeded our expectations and on a few occasions it has taunted us to keep up," he says. "We have chosen to grow in a clear and definite direction."



Paul Gunn

President and CEO, Soricimed Biopharma Inc.

New Brunswick is not the most likely place to start a biotech company, but Paul Gunn is making it work. He takes pride in having raised the required finances (some \$10 million), engaged partners and shareholders, and set up shop in Sackville.

Soricimed Biopharma launched in 2006, focused on two key projects: a new cancer drug (which could stop the growth of ovarian, breast, and prostate cancer cells); and a suite of tests for the early identification of those same cancers. Both have huge potential, from a life-saving perspective and a financial one. As Gunn points out, successful cancer drugs generate sales well over \$1 billion a year – some, many times that.

The company is facing a major milestone: the human trials for Soricimed's cancer drug are on track to start in May 2012. If early results, expected this summer, are as promising as expected, Soricimed will partner with a major pharmaceutical company for further testing and ultimately bring the product to market.

Gunn says the company is ready for the next step. "Our business development program has been underway for some time," he says. "And we do have some interest from a number of large international pharmaceutical companies."



Dallas Mercer

President & CEO

Dallas Mercer
Consulting Inc.



Founded in Dallas Mercer's basement a decade ago, Dallas Mercer Consulting is rapidly approaching her goal of "being recognized as a national provider of disability management services." In addition to disability management (getting people back to work quickly), the company offers occupational health and safety and industrial hygiene services, and operates a St. John's training facility.

Health and safety is becoming front of mind for a lot of companies and organizations. By hiring "seasoned professionals who have a deep level of expertise and have been in the trenches," Mercer says she offers a rare complete suite of services, from proactive training to reactive problem solving. She's led her company through rapid growth of more than 75 per cent in the past two years, now counting more than 240 clients across Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta. She plans to double her operations again by 2013.

Mercer knows the need for her services is there, and has targeted additional nation-wide opportunities. Through an integrated marketing strategy, adjusting the company's customer service model for national clients, and her own tenacity, Mercer intends to access them.

Tom Hickey

President

Wedgwood Insurance



The commercial insurance marketplace is a competitive one, says Tom Hickey, and his job as head of Wedgwood Insurance is to stand apart from the crowd. After a fairly stable period, Wedgwood is showing new growth, as Hickey succeeds in rebranding the company as more than just an insurance vendor.

What's changed? Well, you won't see any more billboards advertising Wedgwood home insurance, though that is still available. If you are looking to reduce business risk and increase productivity, however, take note of Wedgwood's newest offerings. Under Hickey's guidance, seminars and services relating to business productivity and continuity, strategic hiring, and "Noise Reduction" have become a growing part of the company's revenues.

"Our client feedback has been tremendous," says Hickey, noting that the new consultancy services, launched midway through 2011, accounted for 15 per cent of that year's new revenue. It's also allowed for deeper commitments from clients.

Across the business, Hickey is working to simplify processes and integrate social media platforms to improve communications. Although technology is making it less necessary than it once was, Hickey plans to open a branch outside Newfoundland within a few years, capitalizing on the new business direction.



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Alexander MacDonald
Vice-President, Admiral Insurance

The Halifax office of Admiral Insurance offers seven-day-a-week sales and support for Admiral's UK-based clientele. Led by Alexander MacDonald, it also happens to be one of the fastest growing and highly rated offices of the billion-dollar auto insurer.

MacDonald's biggest recent challenge, he admits, was an enviable one: to grow the business as quickly as possible in response to UK market demand. In other words, MacDonald had to increase his employees by 45 per cent (growing from 285 people to 420) in 2011.

To do so, he developed a "quick hit leader development program" to train existing employees to take on higher-level roles. The efforts to promote from within were so successful that three courses for new managers have been developed. In 2012, Admiral Insurance will add yet another 100 employees to the Halifax office, following the same model.

"We are developing our own internal talent spotting and talent development program," Macdonald says. "To ... help (employees) develop into a talent pool of future senior leaders." The results have been tangible: high customer service rating and over-achievement of sales targets, even in the face of rapid growth.

Milan Vrekcic
CEO, TitanFile Inc.

Milan Vrekcic characterizes TitanFile's current status as a "rapid growth stage." That sounds accurate: since 2010, the high-tech company has consistently doubled its customer base every six months. These aren't small clients: they include Lionsgate movie studio, Emory University, the University of California, and law firms, including Stewart McKelvey.

TitanFile offers secure online document transfer and tracking solutions for businesses. If a file is too large or confidential to send via email, TitanFile will step in with military-grade encryption and impeccable security standards.

Vrekcic intends to keep a small, effective team (currently at five employees) in the Nova Scotia office – even as he foresees TitanFile becoming a global security player, providing a crucial service in today's cyber-dominated world. Vrekcic is already in talks with potential partners in the U.S., the UK, and Germany. "Each market brings us unique challenges," he says. "Having experienced partners will be a key to our foreign market entry."



Mike Wahl
Co-founder, Director Canada, Definitions

Eight years ago, Definitions opened as a small, respected fitness studio in downtown St. John's with two staff: co-founders Mick O'Neil and Mike Wahl. There are still a handful of Definitions fitness studios, but the company is better known for providing office and industrial wellness safety programs to major international and local clients.

Today, Definitions staff can be found on offshore oilrigs, in factories, and on other industrial and office sites. With 33 highly trained employees and successful, scalable programs, Wahl's goal "is to grow Definitions to be a globally recognized name in industry."

It's already started. Successfully established in Houston, Texas, this year Definitions will begin work overseas. The company has been able to expand through their current client base, primarily within the oil and gas industry, to access different geographic regions.

Another key to success will be innovation and research: Wahl, named the Graduate Student Entrepreneur Global Champion at the Global Student Entrepreneur Awards a few months ago, is a PhD candidate in medicine. "Everything we do at Definitions is science-based," says Wahl. "It's been our philosophy from the start."

