



A high-level grad student recently told rock paper scissors leadership that working at the company was “more stimulating than it was in academia. There’s so many ideas here, and we’re pushed to share those ideas.”

# ROCK PAPER SCISSORS

## A Cut Above at the PR Game

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**By Rebecca Patrick**

Polka dots and cherry blossoms.

They speak volumes about Dmitri Vietze, founder and CEO of rock paper scissors, a public relations firm based in Bloomington.

Vietze is wearing those playful patterns when we meet for an interview this summer at his Fourth Street office. They are a definite tipoff to the warmth and joviality he’s infused into the company – one that he started 20 years ago in Portland, Oregon.

Not long after, he “temporarily” moved to the Hoosier state so his wife, a Bloomington native, could get her master’s degree from Indiana University.

“We thought that we would be here for a few years, but life is just too easy and good,” he smiles.

“We began to build this team and it’s a great place to raise a family (he’s got two kids). It’s functioned so well for both.”

### **A good tale**

An engaging personality, Vietze admits, “A lot of this has been about my own curiosity along the way and realizing that I have a bit of knack for telling people’s stories.”

That storytelling began in the music industry as “the way of helping (independent) artists get some interest and then more recently, pivoting into doing more PR for technology companies in the last seven years. That’s where we’ve seen the growth – to where the tech has surpassed the music part,” he states.

“We’ve been so focused on delivering value for our clients that we’ve gained a strong reputation within those individual industries.”

The tech turn happened as a natural evolution to the core business. Vietze partnered with SproutBox, a

Bloomington venture capital company, and started StoryAmp, a platform for connecting musicians and the press in an automated way.

The end result was that rock paper scissors got so much media buzz for StoryAmp that other music technology companies – and later other tech clients – started to knock on its door.

Vietze, who is from Nashville, Tennessee, went to a music school as a teenager in New York City, his parents' hometown. He finds the music work particularly poignant.

"When you're working with international artists ... there's an emotional connection to helping those people. A lot of them have pretty tragic stories, honestly, about the kind of economic or global hardships they've gone through where they live," he offers.

"They are looking at the dream of breaking (on the music scene) in America and are turning to us. We're responsible for telling their story."

### As it happens

Each narrative is unique and develops naturally, Vietze stresses.

"A lot of times we have to step back and pace (the PR campaign) at the pace the client can go with (so they can meet the demands of possible media coverage). And even to help them clarify what their vision of the company is, etc. ... We'll just meet them where they are."

That kind of free-flowing process appeals to Vietze and is reflected in the company's tagline.

"It's 'deeply eclectic'. It's open to things that happen in the marketplace and things that different team members bring to the table and so forth," he explains.

"You almost get a sense of it once you see the types of companies and artists we work with. It's really about looking for interesting things and following our curiosity and then delivering value through this storytelling; that's us."

Vietze points out that the publicists at rock paper scissors – currently seven in total – are known for their relationships with media and their story pitches. "I travel around quite a bit (to conferences) and hear from (media members), 'I always open your emails. You have the best angles.' That's what it's all about!"

A sampling of rock paper scissors' clients features: CD Baby, the world's largest online distributor of independent music; LyricFind, a major lyric licensing service; and Regatta VR, an immersive learning company out of Bloomington that, among other things, is using virtual reality to teach sensitivity

training around sexual harassment.

### Rock solid foundation

To produce great work means having an internal culture that fosters collaboration and creativity.

Sheryl Woodhouse, chief operating officer, readily lists some of the core values of the place she's worked at the last four years.

"Diversity is very important to us. Access and equity are important to us ... and of course, innovation. That also summarizes the type of clients that we go after," she notes.

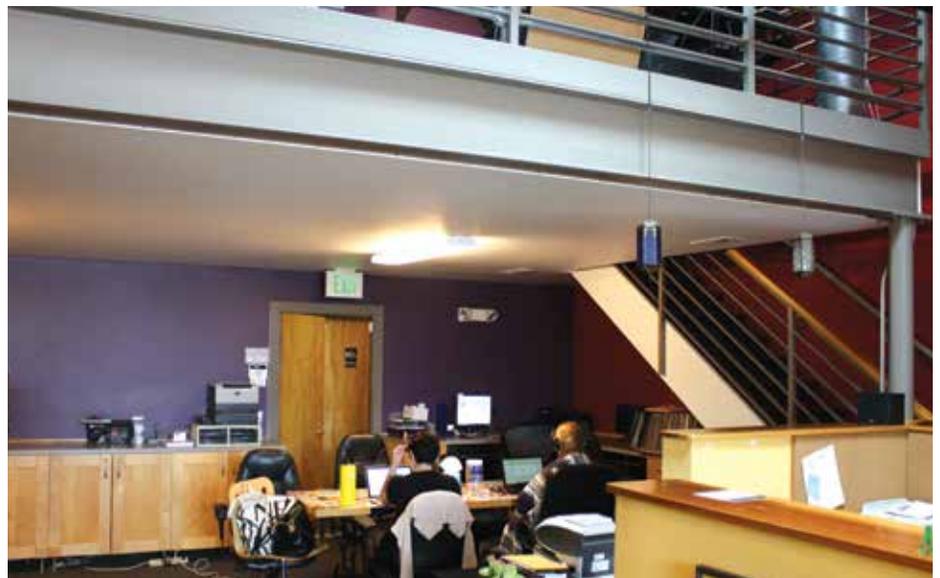
"Here in the office, I think there are several things that may separate us from other companies. We have an exceptionally high level of intellectual curiosity in this office

and, in fact, we have five Ph.D.'s on staff. I think it's quite rare outside of academia. That's in addition to kind of all the fun things you might expect out of an innovative entrepreneurial environment."

Those "fun things" include bringing dogs to work, Friday yoga, jam sessions – several of the staff members are musicians – and monthly pitch-ins. Of the latter, marketing director Eleanor Rust raves, "As somebody here put it, teamwork is better with tacos!"

Woodhouse's demeanor makes it clear that her next sentiment is the most meaningful to her.

"My co-workers are kind and I don't say that lightly. We have 18 very distinct personalities in this building, but what they all have in common is our people are really



The innovative ideas the team has had for client publicity include a 2017 President's Day lyric infographic that showed which commanders-in-chief have been used in the most lyrics. "We got dozens of articles for that (including *Billboard*) showing that Obama was huge in hip-hop," CEO Dmitri Vietze notes.





The camaraderie and attitude at rock paper scissors is unique and conducive to creativity, says COO Sheryl Woodhouse. It's also a playful place. For example, some staff members have taught the interns how to use a turntable.

good to each other and it's a very supportive work environment.

"What's kind of interesting about us is we are taking people from Indiana and other parts of the country and putting (the message) out there to the world with our awesome Midwestern values. It's lovely. Some of the best people I've worked with in my career are in this building."

Vietze nods in appreciation. "That's the kind of thing that makes me so proud. That's the kind of thing that I don't think I did; it just happened ... it evolved. We really got lucky."

### Doing something right

Or rather, they made their own fortune. From the get-go, Vietze could sense he was on to something good.

He fondly recounts his very first music project with a group out of San Antonio. It had found music written in the 1600s about having seen the Virgin Mary in the sky.

"They recreated the music at the time of that sighting. We got tons of press for it – hundreds of articles. I was like, 'OK, this works!'"

Fast forward to now. Rock paper scissors has become the "go-to PR firm for international (music) artists in the United States," Vietze proclaims. From places like Japan, Latin America and South America, to name a few.

The company boasts doing more than 2,000 projects to date for clients on six continents. Ironically, that includes very little local work

– though the leaders are open to it – and it is even more international than national.

As of August 2019, 27 clients were currently in the firm's portfolio, serviced by the 18 employees Woodhouse mentions – comprised of publicists, creative team leaders, salespeople and more.

Only four years ago, the workforce count was at seven.

"We've more than doubled our staff in that time and doubled our tech clients," Vietze states.

"Something that Sheryl has done is make sure we don't give too much work to our employees so we actually do a good job.

"I say, 'More, more, more!' and then Sheryl puts that into achievable perspective," he laughs.

Woodhouse translates that enthusiastic directive to having 25 employees by the end of 2022.

Rust is impressed by the company's steady, continual growth. "It seems like we keep setting new goals and then reach them faster than we expected."

The only downside may be the need to look for new digs in the near future. But it will still be in Bloomington.

As for that "temporary" move 19 years ago, Vietze laughs and acknowledges the firm is here to stay.

"(The city has) treated us really well. We may look to open another office somewhere someday, but we're not looking to go anywhere."