

8 BRIGHT IDEAS

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Sergio Pires and Marcel Zalloua decided the commercial interior design market would be a lot less cut-throat than the construction business

It was also a city with businesses open to new ideas about how their office or shop should look.

"The market there is really conducive to what we are trying to do," Pires says.

It got them through the GFC and allowed them to build a loyal client base. One of their customers is Perth-based internet service provider iiNet, founded by Irish-born entrepreneur Michael Malone, who has aggressively expanded his company eastwards.

Valmont designed iiNet's head office in Perth, offices in Sydney and call centre in Auckland, and is working on the Melbourne offices of rival Net-space, which iiNet took over last year.

Its other clients have included Virgin Money, Citigroup, Macquarie Group, Wendy Wu Tours, the People's Bank of China, Data Monitors, accounting firm Freeman Fox, public relations firm Sefiani and Perth-based engineering and project management company Calibre Global.

Along the way, Pires and Esdaile turned Valmont into more of a family business by getting married last year.

Now based in stylish white warehouse-style offices in the inner-Sydney suburb of Surry Hills, Valmont turned over \$20 million last financial year and is expecting a turnover of more than \$30m to June this year.

It now has almost 30 staff members in its offices in Sydney and Perth.

While their own style is white and minimalist with slashes of primary colours, Zalloua says they deliberately don't try to impose their own design styles on clients.

"That's one of the big differences between us and some of the other design firms," he says.

"We listen to what the client's brief is and then we add creativity."

They say they now have a loyal following of clients with repeat business representing half their workload.

The two never quite got to Valmont but they still manage to go snowboarding regularly (they went to Queenstown in New Zealand last year) and race cars on weekends.

Pires races an Audi while Zalloua races a classic 1980s Porsche 911.

"There's a group of about 10 drivers who are either in the property industry or who work with us who regularly race cars around various tracks in NSW," Zalloua says.

"There's a lot of friendly banter exchanged during the meets and it's a fantastic way to let off some steam."

"My passion for driving is also

Touch of class for workspaces

Valmont's switch from construction to fit-outs was an inspired decision

GLENDA KORPORAAL



INNOVATOR

BUSINESS partners Sergio Pires and Marcel Zalloua both love speed.

The two 29-year-olds, who founded commercial design and fit-out company Valmont, are both passionate snowboarders.

And both love racing fast cars on the weekend.

The two men, both the sons of migrants to Australia, met while studying for a bachelor of construction management at the University of Western Sydney and decided to go into business together.

They founded Valmont Interiors in 2004, as a building company carrying out fit-outs and refurbishments of shops and offices, and naming it after a mountain in Canada where they planned to go snowboarding.

They had started work in the building business but opted to move into the more specialised market for commercial and shop fit-outs.

"With fit-out, things are always happening," says Zalloua, who oversees the operational side of the business. "It's very quick. You are not sitting on a project for too long and you

are not exposed to the risk you would have if [contracting] a building or a home. With office fit-outs and refurbishments, the programs are usually anywhere between four to 10 weeks.

"That more compressed time frame is really exciting and has less risk than [there is in] a long-term project."

"It's also more interesting to work on," says Pires, who handles the front-of-house, financial and sales sides of the business. "Corporate designs are always changing. There are always new trends."

Pires, whose parents migrated to Sydney from Portugal, and Zalloua, whose parents came from Lebanon, began their business on the mezzanine floor of a fruit factory in Sydney owned by Zalloua's father.

They got some work fitting out shops in Westfield shopping centres in the Sydney suburbs of Chatswood and Bondi Junction.

But they soon realised that construction was a cut-throat business that focused only on price.

In 2006 they decided to add a design arm to their operations, so they

could offer clients a service where they sat down together to design new offices and then could oversee the job for the clients.

They hired a talented young interior designer, Jacqui Esdaile, who also gave their business a much-needed marketing push.

"We saw a hole in the market," Pires points out. "There wasn't a lot of competition providing that service, and we just grew from there."

The business took off, but times were tough during the global financial crisis. The company took on some less glamorous work, such as downsizing offices for firms that had laid off staff and dismantling them completely for companies that were moving out or going out of business.

Valmont also expanded into Perth, a thriving city with many new businesses benefiting from the mining boom.

"The Perth market is fantastic," Pires says.

"They really didn't feel the GFC. It really helped us come through that period, and it is continuing to grow."

translated into my everyday life at Valmont.

"Continual improvement both on the track and in the office is what really drives me to succeed."

Their plans include expanding the Perth office, which now has four full-time staff, while tossing up whether to open a third office in either Brisbane or Melbourne.

They say clients are now more

focused on getting more value for their money than they were before the GFC.

"We're finding that clients aren't looking to spend lots of money on their fit-outs any more," Pires says.

"They are being more pedantic about the efficiency of their design. They are making sure that money is not being spent in the wrong places."

"There is more thinking and planning in office spaces than there was

before the GFC. But confidence has come back into the market.

"This year has started well in terms of clients looking for new space and looking to expand again."

Zalloua and Pires say they are not doing so many new offices for recruitment firms these days, which they did before the GFC, or for companies in financial services.

But they say companies in the min-

ing business are doing well. "We are always looking at expanding certain areas of the business," Zalloua says.

"It's hard work but we never stop trying to create opportunities for ourselves."

"By creating opportunities we are always creating value for our clients, which generally leads to more and more work."

"That's what drives the business."

'Confidence has come back into the market. This year has started well in terms of clients looking to expand'

SERGIO PIRES
PARTNER