

# Merger methods: Avoiding the bad, accentuating the good

**M**ergers can bring forth all sorts of positive change. But they can also trigger anxieties from clients and workers who fret over uncertainties about the new organization.

Advertising veteran Charlie MacLeod understood the potentials and the hazards from past experience. So in 2005, when his agency, Sanna Mattson MacLeod, merged with AMHE Marketing, MacLeod had very specific strategies in mind.

As the newly formed Smithtown-based ANEW Marketing Group, MacLeod implemented strategies to “help our existing clients grow and discover new clients that need a bigger agency,” he said. At the same time the new leadership developed additional capabilities, it also strived to motivate employees – and protect clients’ interests.

They managed to hold onto their people and their clients – and even won national and international accounts, including Redisland Australian extra virgin olive oil.

But some mergers are very messy affairs, noted Sue Fredericks, president of Westbury-based management consultancy One Purpose Performance. Nervous staffers, feeling their jobs are threatened, may look elsewhere, or under-perform, she said; competitors may try to steal clients as merged firms try to acclimate.

MacLeod, who had lived through previous mergers where the transition was “not so good,” already had a mantra for this go-round. “It’s not about you, it’s about the clients,” he said.

MacLeod said he was forward-looking from the beginning. A specialist primarily in consumer



**MERGE AHEAD:** Done right, mergers can open new doors to productivity and camaraderie, according to Charlie MacLeod and Liz Vogel of ANEW Marketing Group.

marketing, MacLeod joined forces with a firm that focused more on b2b marketing. The mix of sectors meant that they now could broaden their target base. They brought on a public relations and an Internet marketing component because clients typically also need these capabilities.

Clients continued to work with the same team members, so they experienced no initial change; clients were introduced to other staffers gradually. Now, when new leads come in, the company assembles an integrated team based on skill sets, fostering a spirit of collaboration and camaraderie among the recently integrated group.

To accommodate the now-27-person firm, the partners took additional space at the site MacLeod already occupied. They busted down walls and mixed up work areas, intermixing talent so staffers learned from one another.

Liz Vogel, the partner who heads the PR division, said the environment enables everyone to

“elevate” their work at a program’s inception. For instance, a branding expert at the firm helped her effectively steer a PR campaign in a way she wouldn’t have considered on her own.

To prevent any kind of “us versus them” atmosphere, the partners brought in a communications organizational expert who advised them to run weekly meetings, monthly programs and social events. While one-on-one meetings with staffers can allay fears, leaders can also help staffers set goals and mentor them through the transition, Fredericks said.

“Look for the elephant in the room,” she added. “Don’t be afraid to learn what’s going on.”

Frontline workers especially can clue you in. Also, ask clients if they are comfortable with the transition. “Ideally, they’ll let you know,” she said.

Above all, show employees appreciation daily, Fredericks said, adding, “It makes them feel like they’re part of something.”