

Insider

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Not really, it just seems that way for this PR firm

How could Larry and Sandy Eiler afford to start a business in 1987 when they had seven children to feed and bills to pay?

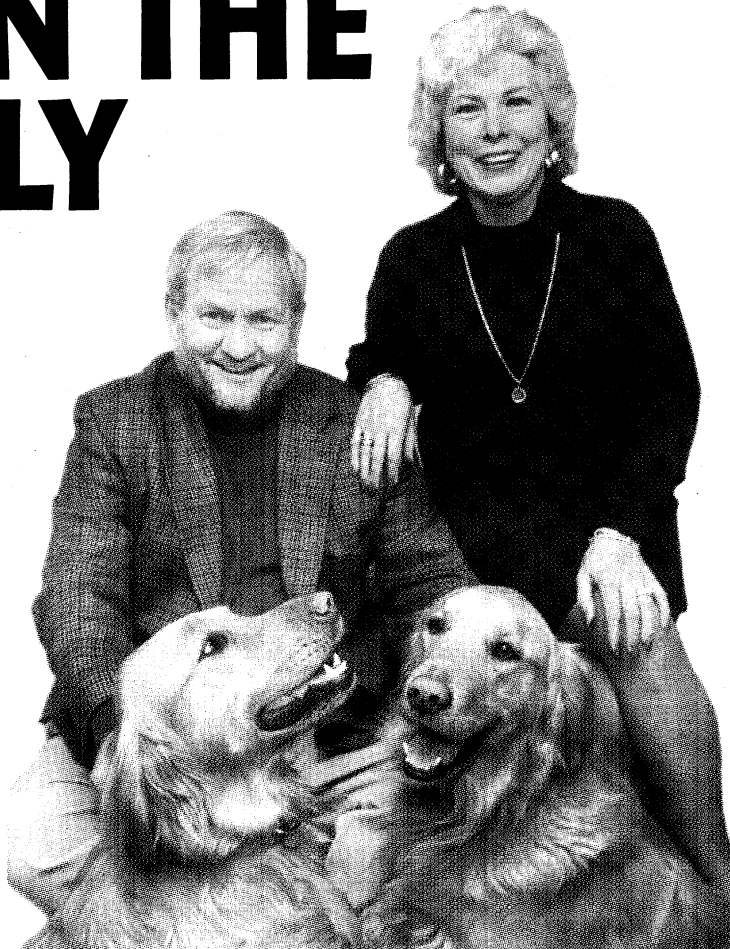
Simple. They used the trunk of their car for office space.

The husband and wife duo are the force behind **Eiler Communications**, a public relations firm based in Ann Arbor with an additional office in the Silicon Valley. Although the company came from humble beginnings and the family hit some obstacles along the way, the firm is well-known in the technology community and around the state.

"For years I kept telling Larry, 'would you please start your own business?'" Sandy, vice president and COO of Eiler Communications, said. "He kept saying, 'I can't start my own business. We have all these kids, and we need security.'"

"Who's going to buy the food when you start your own business?" Larry, president of the firm, said. "We worried about that. But once we started, I worried about that for about three days, because the day I told people I was starting a business, I had a client. I got these clients right from the beginning because I knew people."

Larry and Sandy emphasized the fact that spending too much



IBJ Photo by Chris Boyd

Larry and Sandy Eiler, along with Riley (left) and Chandler, are proud of the family-like atmosphere that they have fostered over the years.



money in the beginning is a bad move for any business. Today, as they sit in their warm, homey office with large windows, plush rugs, comfortable couches, and even a patio outside where they barbecue in the summer, they know it's a far cry from their beginnings, when they had no office at all. But in retrospect,

Larry and Sandy said they know they did the smart thing.

"We had virtually started the company out of the back seat of his car," Sandy said. "We did not have office space. The whole back seat was covered with file folders."

"The trick to starting a business is pretty simple," Larry said. "Bring in more revenue than you spend."

"You do what you can afford to do," Sandy said.

"That was not really hard,"

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Eiler Communications

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Larry said. "When we started out, we didn't have an office like this," he said. "We had the trunk of a car, and I had half an office at the University of Michigan business school because I had done some teaching down there. The first 10 months were like that.

"Cash flow is king in a business. The times in our business when we've had a struggle is when we've lost control of cash flow," Larry said.

"You can't go out and buy beautiful office furniture without having money to cover it," Sandy explained. "When we started the business, we spent \$2,700 to get office furniture. It was all used stuff."

Larry asserted that success in a new business simply means you have to have the most basic element of business: people willing to pay for the product or service.

"The first thing anyone has to remember when starting a business is that you have to have a customer," Larry said. "If somebody's not going to pay you for what you do, then you don't have a business. So the first thing we did was get two good customers."

The young firm was doing well in Ann Arbor, and Larry and Sandy said they were pleased with its success. But the couple was in for a twist when Sandy was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989.

"For me, I would get up in the morning, get dressed for work, go to the lab and have chemotherapy, and go back to work," Sandy recalls. But she said her important role in the company and her responsibility pushed her back into the office as soon as her surgery was completed.

"I came back to work seven days after surgery. People asked me why I wanted to come back to work, and I said, 'Would you stay home in the summer with six kids and a dog?' I had a lot of responsibility with the finances, and it helped that I was needed at the business."

But Sandy said she doesn't feel like it's too much of a chore to come into work. The staff of seven people are more like family than co-workers, talking with one another and even spending time together outside of work. Sandy said having the employees over for a Friday night dinner is one of their favorite activities. What the food will be is often a topic of conversation throughout the week. Besides being smart with the business finances, Sandy said she feels the friendly, relaxed work atmosphere helps people to be at their best and contributes to the company's success.

"The thing that I treasure the most about this place is the culture," she said. "I don't want people to not be able to come in and plop on the 'therapy couch' in my office and just sit there. I don't want that to ever change. I want a group of people that like each other, that can work well together. When people are

happy and comfortable is when things are the most productive."

The office "therapy couch" is just an addition to the many things that make the office more like a home. Larry said many people have commented on the way the office looks like the place you go home to at night.

"Well, a lot of these people spend 10 hours a day here, so it is like your home," Larry said. "So why not make it look nice and be comfortable?"

The employees say they are proud of their office mascots, Chandler and Riley, two golden retrievers. Sometimes they come into the office and keep everyone company. The dogs add to the home-like atmosphere in the office.

"It's fun," Larry said. "Everyone's kind of pet-oriented here, so it's great."

The staff feels more like a family, Larry said, and not just because Sandy, Larry and their daughter, Jennifer Potter, all work together every day. Potter, who works in operations with Sandy, had some views on working with her parents, and said she enjoys working with family.

"There are definitely trying times," Potter says with a laugh. "But they're very easy to work with. They're open to my sugges-

tions. They don't treat me any differently than anyone else. And I prefer it that way."

Potter said Larry and Sandy Eiler value everyone's opinions, and it's one of the reasons they have the staff's respect and a successful firm.

The relationship that Potter has with her mother and father has been strengthened by working with them, she said. "I was always afraid to share my opinions, and they've really encouraged me to open up. And especially with my dad, we have really improved our relationship."

Potter feels the great relationship the employees have with one another is a great way to make work more fun, and less like a job. "I think it's really important for people to get along and be accommodating to one another," she said. "And I've worked in places where it wasn't like that. And you really treat it like a nine to five job. But here, people go the extra mile. That's the difference."

Potter says without hesitation she is happier at Eiler Communication than she has been at any other job. "I feel like I matter," she said. "I'm just as important as anyone else. They listen to everyone's ideas. And it's not hard for my parents. They're just those kind of people."

The Eiler "family" knows where they stand on business skills, and being smart with their money. But they seem to all agree that having a job that doesn't feel like typical work makes the firm unique, and helps with its success. "Have fun, and make money," Larry said. "That's basically it."

By Jennifer Beasley, IBJ

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Sandy Eiler
Vice President and COO
Eiler Communications