

# A New Twist on Some Old Values

John Miles '98, founder of the Web development firm Integritive, weathers the economic downturn with some old business principles—updated for the 21st century.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

**John Miles** '98 started the Web development company Integritive in 2002 with no investment capital, but confident that he'd identified a solid need in the Asheville, N.C., market.

"Someone who returns phone calls," he says dryly.

Having no experience in business, Miles read a book, *MBA in a Day*. He consulted with accountants. And he adopted a set of principles that might, at first glance, evoke the image of a small town shopkeeper a century ago, more than the head of a high-tech small business in a fast-changing 21st-century marketplace.

Keep your commitments. Never promise more than you can deliver. Practice good will in all your dealings.

These days, good will includes respecting the environment as well as tending to your community. Integritive adheres to "triple bottom line" accounting, a set of rules that quantify results according to the three measures of "people, planet, and profit." And the results for Integritive are good, Miles says, proving that the approach works.

Miles, who adopts the job title "Chief of What's Next," has shepherded Integritive through the recession to become a "tribe" of 12 employees, all of whom, like Miles, have unusual titles. Integritive's clients are typical for most Web development firms, with some notable exceptions, such as the blues artist Taj Mahal, whose Web site Integritive recently revamped, as well as a struggling yard worker, living in a tent outside the company's downtown office, for whose fledgling business the company created a Web site as a pro bono project last October.

The work environment at Integritive is playful, consistent with a philosophy that work can, and should be, fun. There is a Ms.



Pacman machine, for example, for water-cooler-type diversions. Staff conduct meetings sitting in bean bag chairs. And the floor plan is open, which Miles says fosters "creativity, egalitarianism, and transparency."

"Real leadership is not in management of people, but in inspiring a purpose and giving people the playground to explore and find their best path to completion," he explains, citing Rochester psychology professor Edward Deci, whose book, *Why We Do What We Do*, introduced Miles to the principle of intrinsic motivation.

Miles describes his journey to the Web world as "serendipitous," a word he uses frequently. A chemistry major who had envisioned a career as an orthopedic surgeon, he was in a state of life planning limbo after a job in a hospital convinced him that medicine was not his calling. Through the Take Five Scholars Program, he was able to spend a fifth year at Rochester pursuing a new interest, humanistic psychology. After graduation, he channeled his energy

▲ **GROUNDING:** Miles, a one-time wanderer and mountaineer, applies the theories of intrinsic motivation that he learned at Rochester to his Web development firm.

into mountain climbing, becoming "an international climbing bum," as he puts it.

Then, on a return from Nepal, en route to Wyoming, the native of Bel Air, Md., made a brief stop in Asheville to visit his brother.

"I fell in love with the mountains, the people, the pace of life," Miles recalls. The one-time wanderer also fell in love with the laptop computer and the Internet, which allowed him to "live anywhere and work everywhere."

Miles speaks regularly in the Asheville community, offering Stephen R. Covey-like tips, such as "Making it in Asheville—7 Principles" to members of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce.

In November, Miles became a regular business columnist in the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. In his first column, "Find Clients Who Fit and Avoid Those Who Don't," Miles advised, "Most businesses know what they do best, yet too many pursue and then keep clients who require them to operate outside their realm of expertise."

It's advice consistent with Miles's steady approach, and informed by a hefty dose of motivational psychology. Says Miles, "the purpose of anything is to find fulfillment in the moment." 📍