



PURPOSE, PASSION AND PROFIT

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT HAGEN

Spring Board

Richard Tait co-created Cranium as a way to help “everyone shine.” 22 million sales later, it’s clear he’s on to something, **Curt Rosengren** explains.

As a young boy in his native Scotland, Richard Tait had a dream. “I love music,” says the co-founder and Grand Poobah of Cranium Inc. “Ever since I was a kid I wanted to be a radio DJ.” So, when he left a nine-year career at Microsoft in 1997, he saw an opportunity to turn that childhood dream into reality. He went back to school to learn how to be a DJ, created a show and snared an interview with a Seattle radio station.

From there, things went dreadfully awry. “They cut me to the quick in about 20 minutes. I was devastated. I left there, I walked for six blocks, tears streaming down my face,” Tait recalls. “They’d taken away my dream. It was unbelievable.”

It was an experience he would never wish on anyone, but in the end it led to Tait’s creation of one of the most successful young companies in the board game industry.

The door that opened was Cranium. Less than a decade later, Seattle-based Cranium has sold 22 million products and in February won the Toy Industry Association’s Game of the Year for the fifth time in the past six years with such offerings as Cranium, Cadoo, Hullabaloo and Zooreka. The company has created such a cult following that it has even been asked to build custom games for three marriage proposals (all successful, thank you). Via the Buck-a-Box pro-

gram, the Cranium Fund has given more than \$700,000 to support after-school programs in the visual, literary and performing arts for at-risk youth.

Cranium is a company based on the simple principle that “everyone shines,” an empowering, egalitarian concept that has families raving and 600,000 customers connecting through a fanatical user community of Craniacs.

“That [radio] door closed and left me feeling so vulnerable and downtrodden,” Tait says. “And from that moment of darkness I said, ‘OK I’m going to find something new. It’s not going to be what I thought it was going to be, but I’m going to find something new.’”

While Tait is proud of Cranium’s achievements (the company doesn’t disclose financial results but said sales rose 25 percent last year), the real joy comes from what those achievements are built on. “The success of the company is almost secondary to me to the work we’re doing and the difference that we’re making on the planet.”

Cranium is making a difference in the toy industry too, outsiders say. “They’re forcing game companies, their competition, to really invest in good game play,” says Chris Byrne, a New York City-based toy industry analyst. They’ve forced people to come up to their level of game play, just competitively. I think it’s helped the game industry as a whole.”

That difference is reflected in the emails and letters that Tait consumes like energy bars. “Every night I read about 200 customer service emails before I go to bed. Before I put my head on the pillow, I like the confirmation that we’re doing good work, that we’re making a difference.” For Tait, who has three kids under age 7, that customer feedback is vital. “It’s a busy, busy existence, so I need to feel that wind under my wings to come back the next day and give it everything I’ve got.”

Some of the messages are just fun—the letter from a little kid in colored marker telling about a party—while others are deeply moving. Tait recalls one in particular from a woman who convinced her conflict-ridden family to play Cranium when they gathered for her 50th wedding anni-

versary. “She had three kids that no longer spoke,” says Tait. “In the third paragraph of this letter, the paper became pitted with the tears that she shed as she started to describe to me the moment of hearing her children laugh again like they were teenagers, the moment of seeing them high five that she hadn’t seen in over 20 years, that sense of togetherness that they had as a family. And the letter ended with, ‘Thank you for creating Cranium.’ And I just wept as I read that letter because I knew for that moment in that woman’s life we’d created magic.”

A Rainy Day Epiphany

The seeds for Cranium were planted three months after Tait’s radio debacle on a rainy vacation day he spent playing games with his wife, Karen Fries, and another couple. He and his wife first trounced their friends at Pictionary, only to be thoroughly humiliated in return at Scrabble. “This isn’t a good experience,” Tait thought. “I wonder why there isn’t a game that is competitive and fun, but where everyone will have a chance to shine.” He started sketching out an idea for a game on the plane home.

Tait convinced another former Microsoft colleague, Whit Alexander, that there was tremendous untapped potential in the board game market. Together, they set out to pioneer a new approach.

Attitude was a critical factor. “When we started the company, there was so much negativity” in popular culture, says Tait. “The values that were being celebrated were horrible. The weakest link. Who’s going to sleep with whose girlfriend on an island. We set out to create a new kind of company, one that gave everyone a chance to shine. We wanted to give people the chance to be the best they possibly can.”

The odds weren’t promising. “The game industry was dominated by two massive companies,” Hasbro and Mattel, Tait says. “If you go down the checklist of businesses that a pioneer should try to go into, games—especially our kinds of games—was not one that you would say, ‘Yeah that’s a great idea.’” To top it off, neither Tait nor Alexander had experience in the entertainment industry. People who



It’s hard for Richard Tait to remain too serious in his joyful office.

“I introduce myself when I get on a plane,” says Tait. “I don’t sit down without saying, ‘**Hello, I’m Richard,**’ and getting a little bit of somebody’s story. Because you never know who you’re going to end up sitting next to.”



What's your
motto
Richard Tait?

“Orville Wright
did not have a
pilot's license.”

“knew better” thought they were crazy.

But Tait has a pioneering heart with a penchant for changing the rules, a characteristic Tait says was planted by his father. “Up until my dad,” he says, “my whole family had been servants. My great-grandfather had been a gamekeeper, my grandfather was a chauffeur and my dad decided to change the direction for our family. He moved away and became a manufacturing guy, and became a professional, and ended up running Polaroid in Europe. He gave me the confidence to say it's OK to change the rules.” That rule-changing inclination is even reflected in Tait's name. “I'm the first one in my family, male, who's not been John or Thomas. Every single person in my family has been John Tait or Tom Tait. And my dad chose to call me Richard.”

Being a pioneer isn't all smooth sailing. Early in Cranium's life, Tait and Alexander made a mistake that nearly doomed the company.

In their first year of business in 1998,

they manufactured 27,000 games. When they first approached retailers in June, they discovered that all the purchase decisions had been made in February at Toy Fair. With 27,000 games coming on a truck, they had nowhere to sell them.

The door that slammed shut with a sickening thud was followed by the epiphany that would open up an entirely new one. “We found ourselves in Starbucks lamenting about what idiots we were,” says Tait, “and I looked up from my latte and I saw all of the people” standing in line who were in the exact same demographic as the people who had responded so positively to Cranium's initial play tests. “I turned to Whit and I said, ‘Let's take our games to where our customers are rather than where games are sold.’ It was crazy to even think a coffee shop would stock a game. We were their first game and they were our first retailer, and we've never looked back.”

Tait found the key that opened the Starbucks door during a random encounter

on a mountain in Africa. “I'd climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro to raise money for CARE” in 1997, Tait recalls, “and on that climb I met a guy named Dan Levitan, who turned out to be the investment banker who'd taken Starbucks public.” After Tait described the new game idea he was working on, Levitan told him to call if he ever needed help. “So then we came up with the Starbucks idea and I'm racking my brain. Who do I know? Who do I know? And then I thought, wow, Dan Levitan, and I called him up.”

Human Connections

It was a perfect illustration of one of the guiding principles of Tait's life: Be open to human connections. “Now I introduce myself when I get on a plane,” says Tait. “I I don't sit down without saying, ‘Hello, I'm Richard,’ and getting a little bit of somebody's story. Because you never know who you're going to end up sitting next to. When I get into an elevator then I'll say good morning to everyone, be-



FAMILY FUN

Richard Tait's five favorite ways to connect his family (besides board games, of course).

Movie Morning Madness

I let each of my daughters pick out a flick, we pop popcorn (yes, even for breakfast sometimes) and curl up in sleeping bags.

The Science of Nachos

Every Sunday night is Nacho Night at our house, where I literally stand in the middle of the kitchen in complete awe of the power of salsa. Everyone in our family has a role in making the masterpiece and then of course everyone gets to enjoy.

Treasure Hunt Surprise

Easter is not the only time to stage a large scale treasure hunt in your backyard or the local park. Dust off the plastic eggs and stage a hunt this weekend.

The Story of Us

Share stories and experiences with your family members. Some story starters I use to get the inspiration lit at the kitchen table include: Picture This, Boo-Boo Show & Tell, Remember Your Childhood and Create a Living Family Tree.

Discovering Family Traditions

The holidays are always a great place to start — whether it's buying a new ornament for the tree each year or going to pick up your tree on the same day year after year. But remember family traditions that fall outside of the holiday timeframe are just as important and special.

cause you never know what that encounter is going to lead to. It's just being open to those moments of connection."

Cranium sold largely through Starbucks for the first five years or so. Then, what seemed like a significant break—expansion beyond those shops—once again tested Cranium's values.

When the company first moved into mass distribution with Target and Toys 'R' Us in 2003, a shipment of games got trapped in a Seattle port strike. Cranium chose to fly a shipment of games in from the manufacturer in China to make good on its commitment. The decision, which ate all the profit from the deal, won Cranium the Vendor of the Year award at Toys 'R' Us the following year.

To meet him, you might never guess that Tait spends his days at the helm of such a successful company. With wild wavy hair that makes him seem just as likely to be a rock star or a mad scientist, the 42-year-old is open and unassuming. The playful look in his eyes radiates fun. His office, with bright red walls and broad windows looking out over Seattle's Elliott Bay, looks more toy store than executive suite.

But he has thought deeply about how he wants Cranium and those who work there to act. Seven core values drive "everything that we do," says Tait. "They've infiltrated everything about our behavior, how we manage, how we train, how we recruit. They've really become a philosophy, a corporate philosophy that drives this organization."

One of those values, "*We delight our customers at every opportunity*," is the foundation for the unusually strong commitment and relationships Cranium has built with its customers. It's a value that runs deep. If you work at Cranium, says Tait with characteristic passion, "you should be delighting customers. That's part of your job."

As an example, he points to the time last year when 2,500 new products called Super Fort had been shipped with a packaging flaw that meant they would arrive damaged. The company called each customer, told them another was on its way and said there was no need to return the original. The response to the proactive approach was overwhelmingly positive. "We

were just fulfilling the emotional contract that we made with this customer," notes Tait, "which was they were going to be delighted when they received the product."

Learning From the Orb

One key to creating a culture where people embrace the potential of changing the rules is another Cranium value: *We have the courage and conviction to follow our own path*.

"If you create that as a value," says Tait, "then you have to tell people that taking risks is OK. So how do you create an environment and a management philosophy that lets people know that taking risks is encouraged and rewarded? You have to let them know [they] can make mistakes. You have to allow people to learn."

One of Tait's favorite failure examples came in 2001 when Cranium ventured into the office market with a product called Cosmo, a "little orb of entertainment that sat on your desk." It was inspired by the way people's minds tend to focus for 40 minutes, then need to take a break. "There were sticky notes that you could pull out of his mouth. It had clay in it. It had word cubes for fun word puzzles. We designed him with Frog Design, the people that did the iMac, and so we had this incredibly cool orb."

Unfortunately, they hadn't done all their homework. "If you were Dave in the design office," explains Tait, "you could put it next to that Macintosh and everyone thought it was cool. But if you were Dennis at the insurance office, it was a beacon for the fact that you were goofing off at work. We launched Cosmo and for the first two weeks it went crazy, and all of a sudden it just stopped dead." The company hadn't talked to enough Dennises to anticipate the problem.

Rather than give up on the idea entirely, they modified it. "We took exactly the same content and put it into a Franklin Covey Day-Timer," says Tait. "And then, if Dennis was in the insurance office, he looked like he was studying his day, but really he was goofing off. It became the No. 1 selling Day-Timer that they had. And so we had just taken the wrong vehicle to deliver that content."



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Part of successfully making mistakes is learning from them. As a result of that experience, Tait notes, “Now we do 110 play tests for every product that we ship. We’ve rigorously gone through it to make sure that it’s right and we’ve got through all the kinks.” As toy industry analyst Byrne sees it, the resulting focus on really listening rather than trying to confirm what they already think they know is one of the things that sets the Cranium team apart. “They’re one of the few companies out there that really does research early enough in the product process to actually have an impact on the product,” says Byrne. “They’re willing to be surprised.”

In Tait’s mind, passion feeds success. “There is a path that exists that is truly *your* path. It is one that you can throw every ounce of energy that you have into. It will give a sense of levity to that pursuit because, despite all the challenges that exist, you’ll be able to rise above them because you’re doing something that you truly love to do.” **m**

Curt Rosengren is a Seattle-based writer, coach and “passion catalyst” who writes at www.passioncatalyst.com.

7 RULES THAT EMPLOYEES LIVE BY

- ▶ We are passionate about creating exceptional products.
- ▶ We delight our customers at every opportunity.
- ▶ We have the courage and conviction to follow our own path.
- ▶ We think big but remain nimble and agile in our actions.
- ▶ We recognize that profitability is essential to our future success.
- ▶ We create an environment that celebrates everything we stand for.
- ▶ We act with care, integrity and respect. We are a team.

