

# BUSINESS REVIEW

West Michigan

## Leveraging partners

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Technology firm **Atomic Object** is not yet 10 years old, but it's found a variety of ways to expand during that time — including helping other small businesses grow.

The Grand Rapids-based company, which was named one of the 2010 Michigan 50 Companies to Watch by the **Edward Lowe Foundation**, builds custom software products for companies ranging from web-based startups to health care and office furniture companies to automotive suppliers.

President Carl Erickson attributes the company's ability to grow even during the recession partly to its client base.

"The clients we work with are companies that are investing in new products and innovation and finding ways of working more efficiently," he said.

In the past couple years,

expanding the company's list of services has helped drive growth.

"Originally we offered just software development, and we got really good at doing that," Erickson said. "But what we recognized was that our customers had other needs, product development needs. So the challenge was how do we help our customers, especially our start-up customers, better define their product, identify their market, figure out what to build in the first place."

Atomic Object brought on several designers and supporting employees to help with that challenge and expand communications and marketing.

But the company also knows the benefit of partnerships to expand what it can do.

"When we do project work, there's no leverage in that model," Erickson said. "We do projects, and they're successful, and the customer pays us, and they're happy. But then we have to do it all over again — everything's brand new, everything's

from scratch.

"So we've always been interested in ways we can share in some of the risk and hopefully some of the reward of our work, so we look for partners who have a particular industry or domain that they're experts in or ideas for a business or application."

Recently Atomic Object partnered with former IBM employee Nathan Owen on a joint venture. Erickson met Owen when they both served on a company board a few years ago, and Owen approached Atomic Object about an idea that resulted in a new company, **Blue Medora**. Blue Medora develops and distributes product enhancements for IBM products.

"They had space in our office and shared all our normal stuff in an office," Erickson said. "It was pretty easy to get set up, and we did all the technological development, software development."

Blue Medora has since outgrown Atomic Object's offices, and Erickson said his

company absolutely would consider another such partnership. He knows that, while Atomic Object can take care of the technology side of joint ventures, it needs a partner with an expertise or idea to add to the mix.

"The partnership, putting those two together, is quite powerful," he said. "So we're always looking. It's just a matter of finding the right partner."

### Atomic Object

**Employees:** 27

**Est.:** 2001

**Location:** Grand Rapids

**Sales:** \$3.41 million

**Top exec:** Carl Erickson, president

**Industry:** Software development

#### What is your business outlook for 2011?

Steady growth, continuing to expand our business services and product development.

— Erickson



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