It may not have been the best idea, but it was the best one he had.

In 1999, fresh from an unsatisfying two-year consulting stint, Paul Fichter ventured to Home Depot, purchased a table saw and drill press, belt sander and band saw, and from his Seattle balcony began crafting artful wooden tap handles for homebrewers.

The idea, Fichter confesses, “went nowhere” with his target audience.

On the other hand, commercial brewers took notice of Tap Handles, Fichter’s upstart enterprise. Orders streamed in for his detailed, ambitious designs. In 2001, Tap Handles created an elaborate handle for the Alaskan Brewing Company—an orca whale leaping from the sea. When Alaskan’s beer sales surged, the brewery hustled to place additional orders.

“This is when I knew I was onto something. I wasn’t just selling tap handles; I was selling marketing and branding. By creating something functional, beautiful, and strongly branded, we could help brewers sell more beer,” Fichter says.

A HEADY MARKETING MIX

Today, Tap Handles dominates North America’s beer handle market. Mixing wood, plastic, and metal, Fichter’s team uses intricate shapes and whimsical imagery to capture a given beer’s “essence” and bar patrons’ attention. In the process, they have revolutionized a once-stodgy, mass-produced product with artistry and spirit.

“You’d be hard-pressed to walk into a bar in North America and not see one of our handles,” says Fichter, whose firm boasts annual sales of $25 million and employs about 500 people at its operations in Seattle, Chicago, and Portland in the United States as well as in China.

Though Fichter says he remains “an engineer at heart,” particularly evident when he orchestrated the manufacturing flow of Tap Handles’ overseas production hub, he has strategically positioned his 15-year-old company as a marketing and branding firm. “I flowed with the response to my idea and allowed it to morph,” Fichter says. “That flexibility really made the company.”

So, too, did Fichter’s ability to analyze situations and seek novel solutions, a mindset developed at McCormick and, specifically, his time with former engineering and management faculty member Wally Hopp.

“When you’re constantly challenged as you are at Northwestern, then you’re constantly working to find answers, to innovate,” Fichter says. And with that, Fichter adds, “Marginal entrepreneurial ideas develop into successful business ventures.

“Nothing good comes from standing still,” he says.

DANIEL P. SMITH