

Canada's Top Growing Companies

Bellwether Investment Management's focus on client experience fuels its growth



Bellwether president and CEO, Bob Sewell, right, and vice-chair Steve Meehan.

Heading a team of 270 portfolio managers and staff for a major bank with the largest investment counsel in Canada, Bob Sewell missed dealing directly with clients. And he saw that many investors needed more comprehensive financial planning.

When he founded Bellwether Investment Management Inc. in Oakville, Ont., Mr. Sewell set about to change all that.

"I decided it was time to do something on my own, without the bureaucracy and complexity of a big financial institution," recalls Mr. Sewell, who created the discretionary portfolio management firm in 2009 – "smack in the middle of a financial crisis" – and immediately saw the difference he could make in people's lives. In 2011, he was joined by Steve Meehan, who had been co-founder and chief executive officer of Investment Planning Counsel.

Mr. Sewell, Bellwether's president and CEO and Mr. Meehan, its vice-chair, have built a company that today has more than \$2-billion in assets under management, offices in 16 locations and a network of advisers across Canada. Bellwether continues to build its presence in British Columbia and Eastern Canada and plans to venture into the U.S.,

focusing on the sunbelt states of Florida, Texas and Arizona, where Canadians have interests.

Its expansion strategy includes organic growth, finding clients through referrals and a burgeoning digital-marketing presence, and it has acquired portfolio-management shops across Canada. It's also growing through what Mr. Sewell calls adviser transitions, "where we recruit an adviser with an existing client base from another firm to join us, and we transition them fully into the strategy and processes that we offer."

Mr. Sewell continues to manage a client base while leading a dynamic staff of 70 who share his passion for connecting with investors. Core to managing family wealth is people's need for income, Mr. Sewell observes.

"Often, they'll say, 'I've accumulated this wealth, and it's more than I ever thought I would have.' But then it's about, 'How do I preserve it, grow it prudently and generate a reasonable income to support myself in the future?'"

He feels "soup-to-nuts" financial planning is overwhelming for people. He believes it's best to focus on issues like planning for retirement or financing children's education and then "end up with something that gives them a

comprehensive plan."

Bellwether practices a conservative style of management. "In markets like we've been experiencing this year, our clients are generating significant income, but with far less volatility," he says. "Clients aren't experiencing the 20 per cent-type losses you're seeing in the broader markets."

The company's biggest hurdle is finding staff to support its growth. "We're constantly on the lookout for quality people."

Capital is another critical need for a company expanding north of 50 per cent each year. Bellwether provides financing for needs such as overhead and acquisitions through Lorne Park Capital Partners Inc., a public company in which he and Mr. Meehan are majority shareholders.

Bellwether's vision "is to be a truly national, independent option to the banks," allowing families to be served personally and locally, Mr. Sewell says.

"It's a very high-trust environment and a very high-trust relationship." He believes investors are looking for a strong brand and the "sleep-at-night factor" that comes from working with a company that's been around a long time, where they're "not a number," but a valued partner.



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