

# Distributor Wins Dell Technology Award

It used to be that Mark Graham would try to win clients by touting his firm's leading-edge technology platform and in-house design expertise. Now he just mentions Michael Dell.

"I tell potential clients that Michael Dell thought enough of our innovation to give us an award," Graham says, enjoying the thought. "This whole experience has been a great public relations tool for us and we'll shamelessly tell anyone who wants to listen."

Even several months after his visit to Dell's campus in Round Rock, TX, Graham is still clearly on an emotional high. "It was sort of like sitting at a table with God," says Graham, only somewhat facetiously. "I followed Michael Dell's career for 15 years. I never could have imagined I'd be sitting two feet away from him and having a conversation."

Last year, Graham's firm, Toronto-based Rightsleeve Marketing (*asi/308922*), was one of 8,000 companies that applied for the Dell Small Business Excellence Award. Open to all industries, the computing giant has held the competition for the last six years. "We felt like we had a good shot, but it's not something you go into expecting to win," Graham says.

In 2009, there were 13 national winners, one from each selected country, including Canada. "To win has been a game-changing experience for us," Graham says. "We knew we'd be able to represent the entire ad specialties industry."

Winning companies, like Rightsleeve, had to show both the creativity and practicality of their technology in serving customers, managing business operations, increasing profitability and gaining a competitive advantage. "At Rightsleeve, we're really technology driven and design-oriented," Graham says. "For example, I know there are companies in our industry that can create online stores, but we do all the coding and development here. I think we understand the business process well and we can customize and control services internally."

As an award winner, Graham and two members of his leadership team were invited to Dell's headquarters for a two-day conference. Dell provided content based on requests from the winning companies. "I was especially interested

in their social media and online marketing," says Graham, who started Rightsleeve about a decade ago. "Hearing their experts address all of us was just amazing."

Of course, the conference highlight was an open discussion with Michael Dell himself. "It was a forum," Graham says. "He was so down-to-earth and eager to participate. I got the sense he could have stayed and hung out with us for hours."



*Mark Graham (left) recently met with Michael Dell at the computer giant's headquarters in Texas.*

Having been a fan of Dell for years, Graham was quick to ask questions and look for feedback. "I asked Michael Dell about growing exponentially," Graham says. "He gave me a vote of confidence that we have a great opportunity to take market share in our industry."

While they spent their days in Round Rock, winners were provided high-end accommodations in Austin at night. "It gave us a chance to sort of let loose a bit," Graham remembers. "It was a lot of great food. I've traveled a lot, but I'd never been to Austin. I found the people of Texas have such warm hearts. The hospitality was tremendous."

Besides receiving a once-in-a-lifetime trip, Rightsleeve was also awarded \$25,000 in Dell merchandise. "We can choose whatever we want," Graham says. "We're just starting to open up some boxes."