

Jeff Hake - JNT

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The roller coaster drops and turns as the riders yell happily. But this roller coaster is not 40 feet up in the air or outside in a hot carnival. This roller coaster operates in virtual reality. It's an example of the creative work of an innovative, high tech marketing company. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Jeff Hake is the founder of JNT Company, an interactive web and marketing agency which is also doing innovative work in virtual reality.

Jeff grew up at Beloit. He was an athlete in high school, even breaking a 30-year-old league record in the discus throw. Jeff studied information systems at Cloud County Community College.

While visiting Manhattan one day, he met a pretty blonde girl named Tara. Upon meeting her parents at their first date, he learned that her father was the man who set the 30-year-old discus record which he had broken: Awkward...

The relationship improved from there. Jeff ultimately married Tara. She earned her optometry degree in Memphis. One day while in Memphis, Jeff got word that he had been accepted for the K-State computing and telecommunications position for which he had applied. "That's great, but what am I going to do?" Tara said. "One hour later, she got a call from Ron Janasek, asking if she would be interested in buying his optometry practice in Manhattan," Jeff said. The timing worked perfectly for them, and Tara bought the business. Today, she is a doctor at Manhattan Eyecare.

Jeff worked in computing and telecommunications for K-State and founded a website company as a side project in February 2008. He called it JNT Company. Why? "Jeff's Never Telling," he said with a smile, but apparently Jeff `N` Tara was the original source of the acronym. By September 2009, JNT Company became his sole focus.

JNT Company began as a website design business but it grew and expanded quickly. "We developed a content management system called Merlin," Jeff said. The company now offers brand identity and social media, copywriting, print design, e-commerce, video production and advertising, search engine optimization, and web application development.

"Everything we do is backed by a promise to understand how marketing impacts business growth," Jeff said. "Our work has touched industries including banking, telecommunications, professional services, consumer packaged goods, healthcare, real estate, agriculture and higher education — including being recently named one of Kansas State University's official on-call agency partners," he said.

In 2015, Jeff was researching virtual reality as a marketing strategy. "Marketing research tells us that a person has to read something 17 to 30 times for it to soak in," Jeff said. "But virtual reality can generate the adrenaline and emotion that makes you remember," he said. JNT Company developed the concept and built a virtual reality trailer in 2016. The trailer contains four moving seats linked to a virtual reality viewing system. "No one had synched multiple headsets with a single experience like this before," Jeff said.

One of their first clients was Whoville, which sponsors the Christmas-tree lighting in downtown Manhattan. During the holidays, the trailer provided a virtual Santa sleigh ride experience. In the summer, it can be a virtual roller coaster ride.

In the trailer, people sit in the chairs, buckle up, and wear the headsets while the chairs move in coordination with the remarkably realistic image which appears on the screen. The trailer travels around Kansas, where it provides a lifelike experience at county fairs and elsewhere.

“There’s a thrill in seeing the eyes light up on the faces of these people,” Jeff said.

Jeff and Tara have two children of their own. They reflect the values of their small town roots. Jeff is from Beloit and Tara is from the rural community of Scandia, population 372 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information on Jeff’s business, see www.jntcompany.com or www.virtualrealitythrills.com.

The virtual roller coaster rolls to a stop and the giddy riders remove their seat belts – as well as their virtual reality goggles. We salute Jeff Hake and all those involved with JNT Company and JNT VR for making a difference with marketing innovation and technology. That combination makes for a good ride.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.