



Jim Courtright and Mary Beth Wilke's Big Thinking By the Hour helps companies create an online version of their offerings. —AL PODGORSKI/SUN-TIMES

Big Thinking helps get the big picture online

SANDRA GUY



**SCI-TECH
SCENE**
e-mail: sguy@suntimes.com

Johns & Laws 21 years ago.

The video might appear on a one-time-only basis or as a series, such as the "Marathon Minutes" training tips that the company created for Chicago-based running store Momentum.

Courtright, a native of Highland, Ind., worked at other ad agencies and free-lanced, while Wilke went into sports marketing and TV syndication, becoming head of national production for WTTW-Channel 11. They reconnected four years ago after Courtright moved back to Chicago, and decided that the future lie in companies marketing themselves and their products by playing video on their Web sites.

Their niche puts them in competition with film production companies rather than amateur video creators.

Big Thinking's work received a boost from two recent developments: People's growing access to high-speed Web connections, and Flash animation's availability in most Web browsers.

Before Flash's greater accessibil-

ity, Big Thinking had to create nine versions of each video in order to fit small, medium and large downloads and to comply with a variety of media players.

Tim Calkins, clinical professor of marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, said Big Thinking's skill is producing video that's both entertaining and conveys a message.

"The challenge is for companies to use Web video in a way that's productive and builds their brands," he said. Big Thinking produced a Web video touting the Kellogg School's book, *Kellogg on Branding*. The result was a 5-minute video that captured the spirit of the book's message, and included clips of interviews from contributors.

The company produces differing lengths and styles of video that range in price from \$20,000 into the millions of dollars. By comparison, a 30-second ad on national TV costs \$381,000, on average.

An example of Big Thinking's video-content production is on Fed-

eral Signal Corp.'s Web site (www.fedsig.com), introducing the Solaris LED reflector to firefighters, police officers and construction workers.

"I like the clarity and excitement of the message," said Jean Staack, communications manager for Federal Signal's Mobile Systems division, based in University Park.

Staack said Big Thinking's team understood how to help the Mobile Systems division use the company Web site to broadcast new product introductions and technologies to its customers.

Big Thinking's owners work out of Lincoln Park headquarters and a studio in Ukrainian Village. They hire free-lance shooters, directors, editors, writers, producers, musicians and other specialists for behind-the-scenes work.

The owners decided to take no angel or investor funding because they wanted to maintain control.

The company is profitable, and the owners' goal is to hit \$1 million in gross sales this year.