

## PROFILE

## Leader's analysis predicts a great future

By KERRY FELTNER

In 1986 the New England Patriots played the Chicago Bears in Super Bowl XX. More than 70,000 spectators watched the game in the Louisiana Superdome. They saw 22 players on the field each down, cheered on their team and watched every play.

One spectator was Stefan Willimann, a 20-year-old intern from Tulane University, who had an entirely different view of the game. He saw thousands of media passes, swaths of people—most of whom went unnoticed by others—working to create a seamless experience, and he mentally acknowledged the millions of people witnessing the event from their living room couches.

His observations set the stage for his future.

“I realized how powerful a Super Bowl was,” he says. “What it means. Not only to a community but to—let’s face it it’s a global event—and having it in my own backyard at the time in New Orleans attending Tulane was ‘Whoa, this is powerful stuff.’ I think I was drawn to the immensity of it.

“(I thought) ‘Look how many people are employed from this and what does that mean?’ And I was on the front lines experiencing it as an intern, which was really cool. When I had that experience, that’s kind of where I said, ‘I want to be in the media marketing business.’”

Some 27 years later, Willimann, 47, has been CEO of Brighton-based Sigma Marketing Insights LLC for just over a year. Leading the integrated marketing services firm was an opportunity Willimann had not anticipated and could not resist.

Sigma Marketing Insights has focused on data-driven marketing analytics, strategy and marketing technology since 1985. It employs 70 people in Brighton and works with Fortune 100 companies primarily in financial services but also in other



CEO Stefan Willimann took the helm at Brighton-based Sigma Marketing Insights in 2013

Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

areas such as the agricultural sector. The company predicts data-driven marketing analytics will increase dramatically in the future and expects double-digit percentage

growth in the years to come.

“I think there is a huge opportunity, because of who’s in the community here, for Rochester to continue being a leader in

marketing analytics,” he says. “When I think of Rochester, I think of lots of things. One of the things I’d like people to think of is ‘Boy, they do some amazing data analytics in that city because there’re quite a few people in town that do that and they do it well,’ and I think that that could be leveraged.”

Sigma leaders realized Willimann’s talent right away.

“It was very clear to me that he was a person of good values, that he believed in walking the talk,” says Gerry Wenzke, operating chairman of Sigma Marketing and previously interim CEO. “I think he has very much a can-do attitude (and) very much an inclusive approach. He’s a strong sales leader, he’s a strong visionary (and) he’s a strategic thinker both with the client and with the firm.”

### Career start

Willimann grew up in Westchester County. When he finished high school, his parents moved to Portland, Maine, which became his home on college breaks. He graduated from Tulane with a bachelor’s degree in physical education and a concentration in sports marketing and management in 1988.

He started his career in the radio business in Portland, but after a few years he decided to move to one of three places: Denver, Phoenix or San Diego, based on the contacts he had in those places and his need for warmer weather.

“One of the reasons I wanted to earn money right out of college after a bachelor’s degree was because I wanted to apply

what I had learned,” he says. “Sitting in an economics class with 150 other people not being able to relate to what was going on outside was not meaningful to me.”

He left for Denver in 1990 and worked for several companies, including Genesis Broadcasting Inc. He spent three years there, becoming a senior account executive before leaving to work for Premiere Radio Networks as a national sales manager for almost two years. From there he returned to New York, working at WFAS-AM/FM in White Plains as a general sales manager.

## “We have a tremendous opportunity because of the world-class talent (here) to showcase data-driven marketing analytics.”

Although working in the established medium of radio, Willimann could see the winds start to shift.

“(I) realized that this thing called the Internet in the late ’90s was kind of important,” he says. “I’ve always been fascinated with how consumers interact with brands, and so when I got out of college there was still just the big three: print, direct mail (and) broadcast, which included TV and radio.

“Now there’re thousands of mediums of how to touch people. The marketing services that are enabled through this whole new world that we now live in ... it’s fascinating when you think about the evolution of media and marketing and consumer interaction with brands.”

The consolidation of radio stations and the draw of the Internet were the main reasons Willimann left radio.

### An entrepreneur

In 1996 he started his own media company in Portland, BroadcastMarketing/BMS Inc. The company focused on creating multimedia channels to bring customers closer to products and services.

“I saw (the Internet) coming, and we actually found a few visionaries for clients who saw it as well,” Willimann says. “We did a lot of experimentation with online video and online audio.”

He grew the company to 16 employees and \$10 million in revenues during his eight years there.

The business was a chance for Willimann and his team to try new marketing tactics with the Web.

“I remember leaning over our computer screen, everybody’s leaning into the computer, sort of looking at these stick figures that we think are people, but we’re like, ‘Wow, isn’t this cool? We’re streaming video and audio,’” he says. “I was always fas-

cinated by this technology and how it’s enabled the evolution of communication.”

He sold the business in 2004.

“(I) didn’t really make any money on it, but I didn’t really lose any money either. I paid myself for eight years, and I did a lot of experimentation,” Willimann says.

He had an opportunity to return to New York City to become a regional sales director for WorldNow Inc., a provider of Web technology platforms to the media community.

After a year there he left and became vice president of strategic sales and marketing at CBS Broadcasting Inc. He was promoted to senior vice president of the CBS Outernet division shortly after and spent four years helping the media outlet develop strategies for a place in the digital market.

“My role there was to help them take a traditional medium and evolve it, but most importantly (to) find brands that were willing to pay for that experience,” he says.

CBS Radio 2.0, a project he worked on, combined the firm’s 200 radio stations within a common portal.

“I’d never done it before,” he says. “There were a lot of really interesting challenges along the way of unifying all of these platforms. What would happen was we would get into little turf wars,” he says. “The TV people, the radio people, the outdoor people (and) the digital people all wanted their piece of the revenues, so you try to all play in the same sandbox together.”

Measurement in the media industry during that time began to shift, creating opportunity and confusion for some marketers, Willimann says. For example, advertisers and marketers had historically used Nielsen ratings for television and Arbitron ratings for radio.

“Now you’ve got this thing called the Internet that tracks everything, and so it helps and hurts you. Once it became measurable (it was a) game changer. I’ve decided to take my career down the measurable route because I think it’s smarter,” he says.

His entrepreneurial spirit helped him move forward with News Simply Corp., a company he founded in 2010 in Portland. It aggregated online news and information from TV, newspapers, radio, magazines and blogs. The idea for the company came from a Pew Research Center study on the consumption of news in the United States.

“I read this study and it hit me right between the eyes,” Willimann says. “(It) was all about Americans’ patterns on how they consume news and information, and it said that most Americans get their news and information online on a regular basis. But

## Stefan Willimann

**Position:** CEO, Sigma Marketing Insights LLC

**Age:** 47

**Residence:** Pittsford

**Education:** B.S., physical education with a concentration in sports marketing and management, 1988, Tulane University, New Orleans

**Family:** Wife Sarah; son Jack, 6

**Passions:** Family, work, the ocean, golf, skiing, world cultures

**Quote:** “This is not a static industry. This is a dynamic industry that is evolving rapidly, and we have an opportunity in Rochester to be the hotbed—the place you go to for data sciences and marketing analytics.”

they go to three different websites, and so it occurred to me, what if they put those together so you only have to go to one place?

"I was the angel investor behind it, and I got a group of what I thought were really smart people together and we created an online news network just for the state of Maine."

Maine was a good test market because of its size and the pride of Mainers, Willimann says.

"I felt the people were proud of the brand and so the name of the specific brand in Maine was called MaineNewsSimply," he says. "Mainers love things from Maine."

The company was sold in 2013, and Willimann set his sights on Rochester. Last October he became CEO of Sigma.

"Stefan has a deep sense of leadership and he has a very charismatic personality that draws people to him," says David Widmer, general manager and market manager for Connoisseur Media LLC, long-time friend, mentor and also Willimann's brother-in-law. "He's an all-around great guy, which I think is important in business these days. Not that it's a popularity contest in what we do, but I think that having the ability to have people not hate you and not completely be repelled from you is a big part of business."

Willimann has witnessed the media industry's rapid evolution firsthand.

"It's been really fascinating," he says. "It's really what's led me here. We help our clients decide what are the best mediums to talk to their customers, and so the evolution of marketing has gotten so that it's all about data now and digital has enabled that."

Starting ventures without a clear view of the future of the media industry was comfortable for Willimann.

"You're out on an island," he says. "You've got to be bold, and it's sort of like standing on the plank out there with the sharks all around you and you have a conviction that you're not going to fall off even though the thing's wobbly; you stand there anyway. It's because you believe in it."

"It's visceral for me, I think. I've—good, bad or indifferent—always been able to see what's coming more from a gut than maybe a real informed view."

Willimann did not expect Rochester would be in his career path, he says.

"Honestly, I never really saw myself (in) Rochester; it just wasn't on the radar," he

says. "But there were two reasons I came here. I always am up for a challenge (and) the world of big data and marketing analytics is the next frontier of marketing services."

Willimann was connected with one of the partners at Sigma Marketing, however, and realized the opportunity Rochester could offer him.

"The next paradigm is this data frontier and how it's completely transforming (our lives) on many different levels," he says. "If we're in a nine-inning game, we've just started the second inning, and to me that's really exciting as a professional marketer."

Data analysis is changing the way marketers operate, Willimann says.

"Years ago analytics was something that maybe big companies and the government did," he says. "Now anybody can do it."

### Natural leader

Leadership is something that comes naturally to Willimann, his wife says.

"I would say that his biggest strength is sort of figuring out who goes where and how to motivate them to do the best they can," says Sarah Willimann. "A lot of times he pushes people outside of their comfort zones."

She added: "There's humor in everything, but I think what a lot of people mistake is that he's such a nice guy and they don't really believe that you can be this nice of a guy and be successful."

His career has moved forward in some ways based on his willingness to learn, Willimann says.

"I would say one of the things that has helped me is being comfortable knowing what I don't know," he says. "It doesn't mean that I won't get the answers but (that I can be) comfortable not having all the answers."

Being in the marketing industry, Willimann has learned that those who try to dictate where the focus of the industry will be in the future will be left behind.

"Data marketing services is a very exciting place to be right now," he says. "The Internet: When there were those visionaries out there who would say, 'Well it's going to be doing this,' I used to say, 'Run far and wide from those guys and women because we don't really know.'"

Wenzke, Sigma Marketing's operating chairman, helped to recruit Willimann for a reason, he says.

"Stefan has an unlimited future," Wenzke

says. "This is a very talented person who is a very hard worker. He's courageous, he's had to make a lot of changes and he hasn't backed away from making them. Whatever happens, he's one of those people that is going to come down on his feet. I'm a big fan of his and I've enjoyed working with him. I think he's an excellent leader."

Rochester is starting to feel like home after 15 months, says Willimann, who lives in Pittsford.

"What makes the community are the people in it," he says. "The reality is that we couldn't have been more fortunate or blessed with friends so far."

"We look at life as truly a journey, and there is no real destination. It's just the journey and along the way you've got to very much live in the moment and be present, and if you can do that then life takes on a very different experience."

The community's technical roots are one of its biggest draws for Willimann.

"One of the things that I've been blown away by is how much innovation there is in this community," he says. "I'm only just starting to learn about it. There's a fabric here that is incredibly attractive to the people and that's what makes a community. I feel fortunate to have landed here because of what we have as a community."

After a challenging first year of change at Sigma, Willimann is settling in.

"The first year I was here was very demanding. I thought it was very hard because I had to make a lot of difficult decisions, which are never fun. And it's sort of like sipping off the fire hose when you first come in," he says. "But we got through all of that and things have settled down, and now we've just got to execute on the plan that I put in place. One of my growth objectives includes an opportunity to grow both organically and potentially through acquisition."

The marketing industry here has potential to be a global player in data-driven analysis, he says.

"Wouldn't it be cool if this was the hotbed, the outlier for data-driven analysis?" he says. "I think we have the ingredients right here with the schools, with the community (and) with the people."

He added: "We have a tremendous opportunity because of the world-class talent (here) to showcase data-driven marketing analytics."

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