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Cathy and Sally Dew's Isys Idea Systems doubled its revenue in the past year. Their clients include BART and Dreyer's ice cream.

## Sisters have fun with Web design

BY MATTHEW BELL

Around the dawn of the first millennium A.D., the Egyptian goddess Isis inspired a popular cult that rivaled a new faith on the block, Christianity. An Oakland-based Web design company and namesake of the Mediterranean deity, Isys Idea Systems, also invoked a feminine power as a new era dawned.

With this high-tech Isys, however, that power comes in the form of two sisters from West Palm Beach, Fla. Cathy and Sally Dew bring the right skills at the right time to the right industry. They didn't know how right their decision to start a Web business was.

The sisters left Florida's Gold Coast in 1995 and headed straight for Oakland, which seemed to be both a pleasant place to live and a less cutthroat place to start a Web design business than the heart of Silicon Valley.

"We were banking on the Web being a big thing," says Sally, who is 37, with a soft Southern accent. "But we didn't know how big and fast it would be."

With just 14 employees, Isys is still a small operation. But its gross revenues have doubled in the past year, recently hitting the \$2 million mark. And the Dew sisters are having so much fun, they are not even thinking exit strategy yet. Not looking to get bought out? "Then what would we do," the faster-talking Cathy, 40, says. "We're a long way from thinking about that."

The two sisters live in Montclair and are both married and have dogs, but no kids. You might see them jogging together around Jack London Square or Lake Merritt. The two run or workout together three or four times a week. They also play basketball regularly.

They miss the warm water of Florida, but other than that, they fell in love with Oakland as soon as they arrived.

The two sisters see their company's small size as an

advantage in being able to cater to its diverse clients, who range from public entities like BART and the Port of Oakland to retailers like Dreyer's ice cream, and a new education and career-planning site, MyRoad.com. They say Isys makes the client an important part of the process of designing a Web strategy from the beginning, and then responds to the client's changing needs as they arise.

John Casella, MyRoad.com's founder and CEO, is sold on the Dew sisters' company: "We've made a conscious decision not to build an internal (Web design) team because they're with us. It's not a project they've done with us. It's a relationship."

Cathy is the president and resident technical expert at Isys. Among her admirers is Keith Slaughter, data warehouse developer at Dreyer's, who has worked closely with Isys: "Cathy is incisive," he says. "She's a crack designer and she has the rare ability to lead a roomful of people to consensus."

When Cathy decided to leave architecture to pursue graduate work in computer science and artificial intelligence, her friends thought she might be making a mistake. But that was back in the mid-1980s when many of today's Internet stars were still memorizing their times tables. She cut her technical teeth in the health care industry as a software developer in Gainesville, Fla., working for one of the city's largest employers.

Isys is the first collaborative effort for the Dew sisters, but they have worked under the same roof before. Sally put in some time with the same Gainesville company, as a graphic designer. Like Cathy, she went to the University of Florida, where she studied journalism and then got into the design aspects of publishing. "Then the Mac came along," she says, and she has been working with computers ever since.

One of the sisters' first creative experiments in Web design was Spike Webb, the artificially intelligent Net detective and protagonist in their serial Internet story (still up at [www.spikewebb.com](http://www.spikewebb.com)). The project was both fun and educational, and it also might have landed them their first real client: Oracle. Someone from Oracle's financial division contacted Isys with an e-mail message, and soon hired Isys, then only three people, to design its intranet site. "Back then, a lot of business came from just having your site up," Cathy says. "It was good, cheap marketing."

The Web design industry has changed since then. Like the warehouse district near Jack London Square where the Isys headquarters is located, the business is getting more and more crowded. Cathy and Sally realized the importance of following up with customer service from the beginning though, and they have kept up their business relationships with many of their original clients. That commitment, and a knack for bridging on- and off-line thinking has made Isys successful, the sisters say.

"We figured out the Web equivalent of dog-eared pages in a college catalogue for MyRoad.com," Cathy says.

Whether it's the trick of the guidance counseling trade or selling ice cream, Isys takes a client's business objectives, "and we twist and turn them into what can be done on the Web," Cathy says.

What's next for Isys? The Dew sisters would like to keep the growth curve of the company steady in terms of employees and revenues. They want to expand their services to offer clients more in the way of e-commerce and marketing strategies. And they are even thinking about developing their own software tools for Web design.

Bell is a contributor to the Business Times.