

Chris Moehn – Point of Pride Transcript

[00:00:00] **Chris:** So many great and talented people have worked at Simantel. When I started, I learned a lot from our founder, Jim Simantel, and that knowledge has been passed down through the generations of ownership. Just being a part of this agency, being able to return the favor and contribute to not only the success of Simantel, but the growth of so many people is my point of pride.

[00:00:31] **Misty:** Hey there friends. Thanks so much for checking out our Point of Pride series. In celebration of our 40ish anniversary, Simantelites are sharing stories about what makes them proud to work at Simantel. You're about to hear a very special story from Chris Moehn. Chris is our Executive Creative Director and has been pouring his heart into Simantel for 34 years.

[00:00:50] He's our connector to Simantel's history and has helped carry on the legacy of our founder, Jim Simantel. Give it a listen for a peak into Simantel's past and how our reputation for having such a crazy talented staff was built and lives on today.

[00:01:10] **Chris:** When I was asked to share my point of pride earlier this year, I knew it was going to be tough deciding what one thing stands out for me. Over the years, I've been lucky enough to have a lot of great experiences and success, and while talking about a standout project or awards or even events, would've been great, nothing stands out or makes me as proud as helping so many people start their careers here — helping them learn and grow, plus playing a role in making this a great place to work.

[00:01:38] Over the years, I've taught dozens of creatives right out of school how to do their job and be successful at it. For me, it's more about the people and the place than anything.

[00:01:49] I'm Chris Moehn, Executive Creative Director, and I've been at Simantel for 34 years. I'm from Peoria. I grew up on the East Bluff and I went to school at ISU, but I wasn't thinking of staying because I just didn't think any place in Peoria was doing the kind of work I wanted to be involved in.

[00:02:06] In school, I was so inspired by all the great designers at the time, like Milton Glazer, Herb Gluberland, and Paula Scher. I was really drawn to that high level of design, and that's what I wanted to do, but I didn't think it existed in Peoria. I had every intention of going to Chicago or St. Louis to find work. I had already gone to both cities and done a handful of interviews at some different ad agencies and design shops.

[00:02:30] Then I saw an ad for Simantel in the newspaper of all places, and I just called and scheduled an interview. I remember when I came in for that interview, as I walked in and made my way up that long staircase in the building on Main Street, I had this overwhelming feeling like, this is a really cool place and I want to work here.

[00:02:48] It just had that vibe, like some of the places I was interviewing at in Chicago and St. Louis. They had some of the work hanging on the walls, and Jim was bigger than life too. Meeting him in the first interview and then coming back and interviewing with Susie was a great experience. I'm super proud I was able to find a place like Simantel and stay in the area.

[00:03:08] I just didn't think it was going to be possible. I think that's a testament to Jim. He really brought that level of design to Peoria, and I really do credit him for doing that. It didn't exist before he was here. When I started, we were literally just a design shop and had to do a lot of everything because we were so small. You had to wear a lot of hats on top of design, like account planning and production.

[00:03:31] And any time anything new came up, we were the ones looking for vendors to get the work done. Many of those service lines have now been brought in house and the teams had been built. Having a larger agency with a staff that can focus on all the different things that we offer has really contributed to a better work-life balance.

[00:03:49] When we were smaller, we worked a lot of overtime. A lot of times you did client work during the day, you didn't have time to design work, so that happened at night. We didn't even have account services when I started; it was just the designers. The designer was the account person. I think when Jim started Simantel, that was something that he preached: that clients talked directly to the people actually doing the work.

[00:04:13] It was important to him when he started the agency because I think when he was in Chicago, he felt like there was a gap between the people doing the work and the client, and he wanted to close that gap. He hired talented designers that were also great at building client relationships – folks like Kevin and Susie and Barb.

[00:04:29] They were able to sustain that business and gain new clients and keep growing. Obviously, Jim was really, really good at it. One thing that hasn't changed is our approach to hiring talent. A big component of being a creative is being able to think strategically, not just moving things around on the page so it looks pretty.

[00:04:47] We have to design things that not only stand out but have meaning with the strategy behind it. I think that's always been part of what Simantel's done. Even when I first started, Jim was always very strategic in the way he approached the work, and Kevin and Susie were even more so. They were much more strategically minded and really pushed the agency in that direction.

[00:05:07] So when we're interviewing someone, we're not just looking at their work. We're interested in the strategy and the thought process behind it. Having good work is table stakes for anyone that comes into the Creative Department, whether a designer or a writer. When we interview, I'm more interested in how they got to their solution than the actual finished piece.

[00:05:25] Just about everybody that's producing something at one point or another is going to be in front of a client, so that's something that we have to consider too. Being able to be in front of the client and be articulate and talk about the work that they're doing — that's a hugely important part of what we're looking for.

[00:05:41] When we're doing interviews, some of the things that we look for more intangible: the work speaks for itself. But when we meet, we're making sure that they're going to be a good fit. We look for people with the right personality — that really care about the work and about the other people that they're going to be working with.

[00:05:58] Jim Simantel always said one of his biggest strengths was finding good people, and I think that that's one of the things that I'm proud of that I learned from him, is really how to look for those people that have talent and are going to be a good fit. I also learned a lot from Maggie. She just has such a natural ability to think about things in a different way, and hopefully I pass on what I've learned to the next generation too.

[00:06:21] Being a great designer and art director isn't something that everyone can do. And what you do with it afterwards to mold it is super important. We've always been focused on finding the best talent that we can and showing them the way. I always like to get young people in and show them the way that we do things, and grow them that way.

[00:06:39] A lot of our work isn't glamorous. We're not working for big retail fashion or consumer brands. The one thing that is super cool though, and that we've always talked about with the people that we bring on is that we work for a Fortune 50 company. It may not seem as sexy, some of those other retail brands, but it's a great brand to work for.

[00:06:58] Caterpillar's allowed all of us in the Creative Department to learn and grow in ways that we wouldn't have if we didn't have them as a client. They've allowed us to travel literally all over the world and meet a lot of their customers and really get to the core of what Caterpillar stands for and what they're all about. And I think talking to their customers and being able to bring that back to the work that we do really just makes it that much more meaningful and resonates with the people that see it.

[00:07:22] I'm super proud the agency has grown as much as it has and being here to help drive that. But of course, there are growing pains. One challenge that comes with size is simply managing the team and being able to mentor them and transfer that knowledge. I'm also proud to be working with the talented people we have on staff right now and being part of their story too.

[00:07:40] I can't tell you how much I learn from them every day. We also want to make sure that we're challenging people enough and giving them the work that they find meaningful, and it keeps them engaged and focused. I think, as always in leadership, we're doing the best that we can to make this a great place to work and for people to be proud of the place that we've got here.

[00:07:58] That desire has grown even more since Tim and Misty have taken over. They really want to make this a better place where everyone's included and makes people proud to work here and a place where they want to stay and grow. It hasn't always been smooth sailing of course. There have been a few bumps along Simantel's path to success, but it's definitely been a memorable experience.

[00:08:19] There have been a lot of characters, not just in the Creative Department, that have worked here and have made this such a fun place to work. There have also been countless awards and successful campaigns, but events in branding are some of my favorite work because it's just more meaningful. I've been involved in trade shows throughout my whole career.

[00:08:37] For me, it's fun because you really pour your heart and soul into it, and in some cases for well over a year, for an event that's only going to last four or five days. So, you really build a lot of camaraderie with a team that's invested in these types of events. Brand has always been a huge passion of mine.

[00:08:53] The marketing work that we do will last for a little while, but if done right, a brand will live for years and even generations — literally setting the direction of a company. Being involved in rebrands and even just launching companies over the years have been a lot of fun. Khapheide was a big one; we did virtually everything for their rebrand.

[00:09:13] Busey Bank was another. We did the rebrand for them when they merged with Main Street Bank. We also did the rebrand for G&D Integrated, where they actually merged three companies into one. And of course, countless branding initiatives for Caterpillar, internally: MineStar™ suite of offerings, with a big project that defined their go-to-market strategy.

[00:09:32] But it's more than just the work — it's the people. I selected this as my moment of pride because at its core and agency is its people. Being a small part of the growth of so many talented people, mentoring them along the way and teaching them how to do great work has really been such a privilege and I'll always be thankful for that.

[00:09:57] **Misty:** Thank you so much, Chris for sharing your story, our story, Simantel's story. You've been such a big part of our history and helping to shape the agency and our creative staff, and yet you're so humble. I admire the way you mentor and teach the people on your team how to be great designers. You've had an impact on the lives of so many and have truly helped build the legacy that Jim Simantel started 40 ish years ago.

[00:10:21] If you liked Chris's story and want to hear more, head over to marketing.sweats.com and check out our very special season six, where you can hear my full interview with him, and other Simantelites, as they share their point of pride in celebration of our 40ish anniversary.