



★ PROFILE

# WESTWERK

[www.westwerk.com](http://www.westwerk.com)

As it celebrates its 10th anniversary, this digital agency shares what life is like on the Silicon Prairie

> Autumn 2016 marked Westwerk's 10th anniversary. It was a chance to look back on a decade in which the Minneapolis-based digital agency carved out a fruitful niche as an award-winning specialist in WordPress website development. We were keen to learn more about Westwerk's story – and what the next 10 years have in store – so we asked founder Dan West, director of operations and culture Emily Berens, and account executive Marissa Noble to dish the details ...

**net:** How and why was Westwerk set up?

**DW:** After working as a creative in various capacities for many years, I decided to quit my job and figure out a better way to run a business; one that was transparent with its employees, as well being a rewarding place to work. I wanted to create a place that people wanted to go every day.

It sounds cheesy, but having a solid commitment to customer service was also something notably lacking in many creative agencies, and I felt that a client-focused approach to work would ultimately lead to a successful agency.

**net:** What made you decide to specialise in WordPress?

**DW:** We'd spent years building websites from scratch using a number of different platforms, either due to a client request or to the skillset of our staff at the time of the project. That approach proved to be very inefficient and costly in the end, both for us and for our clients. ►







## INFO

**Location:** Minneapolis, MN

**Established:** 2005

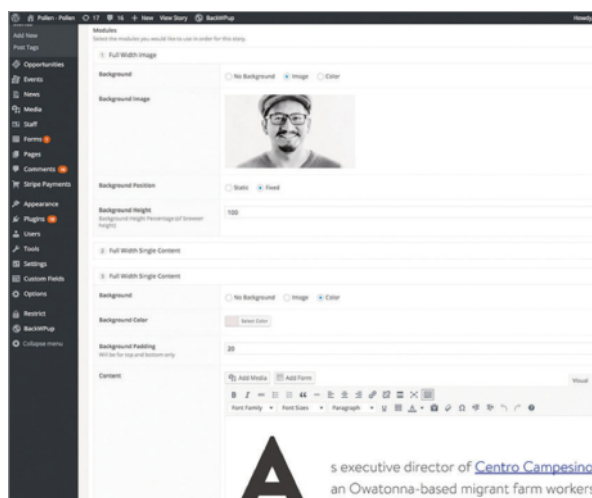
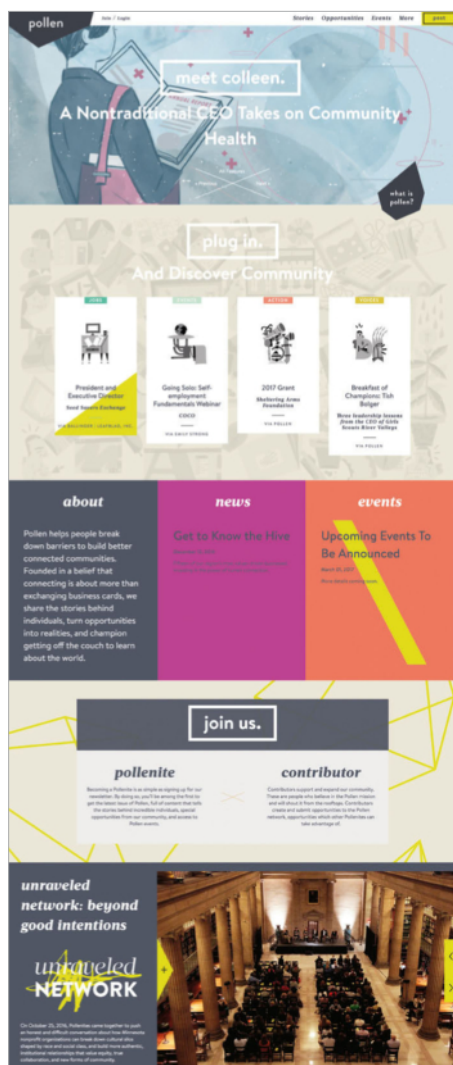
**Team size:** 16

**Areas of expertise:** Branding, design, WordPress development, accessibility

**Clients:** McCrea's Candies, Travel Beyond, Pollen, Boise State University, Solium

**Awards:** Webby Awards, Creativity International Awards, PRINT Regional, AIGA, GDUISA





**Pollinating ideas** Pollen, which promotes connections between communities, approached Westwerk for a rebrand. The resulting 'publishing powerhouse' won a Media & Interactive Design Award

and then create solutions that will support them. It helps that we have a knack for identifying things in clients and organisations that they often don't see themselves, and then bringing those things to life through branding, design, strategy and development.

Also, we don't just accommodate what our clients think they need. Instead, we trust that they came to us for a reason and we strive to visualise and design in the best way to reach their goals.

**net: You won a Media & Interactive Design Award for your work with Pollen. Could you walk us through the project?**

**MN:** Pollen is a nonprofit that creates a space for communities to be better connected. Its established user-base ranges from local artists to C-suite executives, each looking for the ability to interact with one another and share their voices online. When we first sat down with Pollen, we conducted a thorough deep-dive of the organisation's goals, mission and opportunities for growth.

We then evaluated its digital presence to identify areas for improvement, and soon realised that Pollen's existing website wasn't pulling its weight. The Pollen team wanted a publishing powerhouse that could showcase gorgeous editorial content while still being accessible on mobile and tablet devices.

After a rebrand, intensive discovery stage and digital strategy, we were able to produce an award-winning WordPress site. Pollen can now put the spotlight on its beautiful, inspired editorial content of photography, GIFs, animations, text and illustrations.

The content is also easily consumable on mobile devices, with options to swap content presentation on smaller screens. From full-width and columns to image overlays and backgrounds, the longform content builder has it all. The nonprofit's content-editing capabilities now rival those of publications with million-dollar web budgets.

**net: You win a lot of design competitions. What's your secret?**

**DW:** There really is no secret. We feel we have a really solid process that gives us the foundation upon which to get creative on projects. We ask a lot of questions to our clients and really listen to what they say in order to make sure we are aligned with their goals for success. Once we've earned the client's trust, we then have the ability to let our team run free.

From there, it's a combination of keeping our eye on the big picture, applying our talents and experience, and paying close attention to the details. It also helps to have a lot of people looking at things while we're working on them

► We used WordPress in 2009 on a project and found it made things easier for us, from a development standpoint, and for our clients, for ongoing management and maintenance. It was a few projects (and team members) later that we made the decision to stick to one platform and it has made that part of our business incredibly focused. Having that focus makes it easier for clients to approach us because they already know what technology they want to use, and are now looking for experts to help them build a successful project.

**net: You say, 'We don't have clients; we have partners'. What's the difference?**

**DW:** It's simple: we invest in our clients' long-term success. We work with them to identify their business goals and objectives,



**Sugar daddies** Westwerk helped transform Massachusetts-based caramel producer McCrea's Candies from a 'mom-and-pop' shop to a premium fixture on the shelves of the nation's grocery stores

– so we post a lot of work on the walls and let everyone weigh in.

**net:** Westwerk helped transform a small neighbourhood business, McCrea's Candies, into a national brand. How did you pull that off?

**MN:** McCrea's Candies is a small, family-owned company that specialises in all-natural, handcrafted caramels. The owners knew some big changes needed to happen in order to push their business to the next level, and that this would all begin with a more defined focus and stronger brand.

We kicked this project off by flying out to Boston to meet with the McCrea's team, and naturally, sampling a few of their caramels (purely for research purposes, of course!). We took the information we captured in these face-to-face workshops, along with what we learned in our market and competitor research, and distilled it into a comprehensive and cohesive strategy for the brand.

Leveraging McCrea's commitment to all-natural, real ingredients as our inspiration, we created a new look that reflected the simple, upscale quality of the product. Updating the design also meant we had to update the packaging system. To cut down on costs and encourage consistency, we created one multipurpose box that can be modified to accommodate four different products.

Working closely with the company's founders, we were able to help take McCrea's Candies from a 'mom-and-pop' shop whose packaging looked the part, to an upscale confectionery firm that's sitting at the top of its class – and on grocery store shelves.

**net:** You have a very cool workspace. How did you create it?

**MN:** We moved into our current office, a raw warehouse basement in Northeast Minneapolis, in 2012. With the help of close friends and family, we spent the next 145 days crafting the space entirely by hand: everything from the desks and sliding doors, mezzanine and bar were all handcrafted. We wanted to build a place that would physically represent the amount of honest hard work and passion we put into every project.

The result is a vintage-inspired office that combines all the modern amenities of a digital agency with the old-world charm of a turn-of-the-century warehouse. It's a great environment to come to work every day, and makes for a great place to enjoy a cocktail or friendly game of foosball.

**net:** What tech or tools are you excited about at the moment?

**DW:** As of January, our design team has transitioned over to using Sketch for



## \* OFFICE CULTURE



EMILY BERENS

Director of operations  
and culture

### What's on your desktop?

Maneki-neko [a popular Japanese cat figurine], The Daily Mood book, an oversized mug of green tea, project management books, Vitamin B12.

### What do you have on the walls?

My buddy Fritz, project board, calendars, decorative lights.

### What will you do for lunch?

We like to take it off campus to our go to neighbourhood pubs and delis.

### What hours do you work?

We kick off our days between 8.30-9am and close up shop between 5.30-6pm, with the occasional evening 'to-dos' sprinkled in here and there.

### What else do you do in the office?

Play foosball, mini-basketball and shuffleboard, explore Spotify playlists, bake cookies, mix a drink, talk shop.

### How often do you hang out?

We often end the week with a Friday Happy Hour, daring each other to try the various spirits on our bar shelves. We are looking forward to another season of AdLeague Bowling on Monday nights and Tuesday Trivia at a local pub.

### Describe your office culture in three words

Collaborative, compassionate  
and charismatic.



## ★TIMELINE

A look at the key dates in Westwerk's history

**OCT 2005**

Dan West leaves agency life to start Westwerk



**MAY 2007**

The agency works on projects for Target, Gander Mountain and NikeBauer



**JUN 2008**

Launches Rush River Brewing Company rebranding



**AUG 2009**

Westwerk develops a website for its first client on WordPress



**SEPT 2010**

Shift implemented to exclusively developing on WordPress



**JUL 2012**

Launches first enterprise-level website for Boise State University



**AUG 2012**

Since launch, the agency has grown 500 per cent in terms of employees, revenue and numbers of clients



**MAY 2013**

Westwerk and friends build out new 4,300ft<sup>2</sup> office by hand



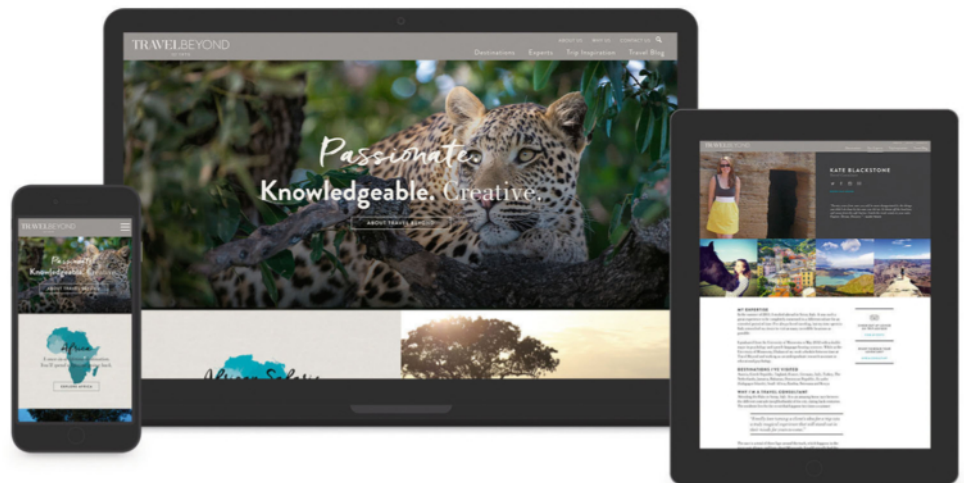
**OCT 2014**

Community storytelling rockstars Pollen launch their Westwerk-designed 'content rocketship'



**JUN 2016**

Westwerk becomes gender-inequal, employing more women than men



**New frontiers** Luxury travel consultancy Travel Beyond is based in Westwerk's home state of Minnesota. The agency delivered a complete brand overhaul, including an updated logo and fresh responsive website

- wireframing, prototyping and designing our interactive projects. It's provided a lot of efficiencies for both the creative and production side of things, as well as making the handover between design and development much smoother.

I'm also pretty excited about VR. We haven't had a chance to use it yet, but we're creating more and more content for our clients and I'd love to be able to experiment on a project with it.

**net: What are the biggest challenges you face in your day-to-day work?**

**DW:** One challenge we face on a regular basis is around client understanding and education. It's fairly common to have to explain aspects of a technical project to a client. What I think happens is that everyone uses technology in their daily lives and gets used to seeing certain things. Then they're in the mindset that these familiar things are 'cheap and easy' to produce, just because they see them daily. And with an iPhone and Pinterest account, everyone can become a photographer and designer.

So we often find ourselves talking clients through the realities of design and custom development and the costs associated with them. I feel that the further we get into the digital age, the more likely it is people may think they can do it themselves or that it's all easy and cheap to produce, which will ultimately lead to devaluing what we do as an industry.

**net: What's the tech scene like in Minneapolis right now?**

**DW:** Pretty large and constantly growing. There's a healthy startup community in place with lots of incubator-type spaces for young companies to get funding and grow. In addition, there are a lot of innovation meetups and events to connect ideas, money and technology.

There's also a large health technology industry here, because we have several large medical companies as well as [nonprofit medical practice] the Mayo Clinic, which has really been accelerating tech growth in the southern part of the state.

On top of that, there are hundreds of creative agencies and tech companies that have cultivated a lot of talent in the area. The tech scene here has often been called the Silicon Prairie. Cute.

**net: What does the future have in store for Westwerk?**

**EB:** We'll probably add a few more members to the team, but we plan to stay relatively small and nimble. We have plans for doing a little more construction to the office by carving out department spaces and more casual meeting spaces (because everyone likes more meetings, right?). Outside of that, it's just about keeping focused on delivering high-calibre creative and development work for our client list. **n**



**Next month:** Hillary Clinton campaign designer Mina Markham