

HEALTHY, WEALTHY AND WISE

Semi-retired CCL Group founder Steve Parker spends his days volunteering and looking for investment opportunities

BY STEPHEN KIMBER

Steve Parker can't remember the year, but it probably happened around the time the founder, chair and CEO of Halifax-based CCL Group Inc. (the one-man PR firm he'd spent 30 years growing into a 600-employee international strategic marketing and communications company) was inducted into *Atlantic Business Magazine's* Top 50 CEO Hall of Fame in 2006.

That Labour Day weekend, he and his wife Shirley "had one of those discussions." They agreed that Steve, still in his mid-fifties, shouldn't retire completely, but felt it was time to "de-emphasize" the professional services side of his business life.

Over the years, CCL's clients included iconic Atlantic Canadian companies—Irving, National Sea/High Liner, Maritime Life—but success created a cost. "Even though my name wasn't on the door," Parker acknowledges, "I was considered the driving force behind the company, so that meant being there with every customer every day."

"Business is great for many things," Parker says, "but it doesn't broaden you as a person. We wanted to see more of the world, more of the people we loved... By January 1, we began the process one step at a time."

By 2010, Parker had sold off his majority interest in Colour, his flagship marketing and communications company, to focus his business attention on Blue Ocean, a call centre he'd launched to handle tourism client inquiries and public opinion polling for his Corporate Research Associates subsidiary.

Why Blue Ocean? It was not a professional services business. "It had a production centre with headsets and computers. It already had great management. I could provide marketing, business development and strategic advice." More important, he notes, Blue Ocean had the potential to "go global." Soon, in fact, 65 per cent of its customers came from outside Canada.

Selling the company was never in Parker's plan. But then IMP Group called, offering to

sell a French-language call centre it owned in New Brunswick. Was Blue Ocean interested? "We looked at it," Parker says, but "it wasn't the right fit for us, so we said no."

A year later, however, IMP called again, this time wanting to buy Blue Ocean itself. Though Parker says IMP's initial offer was "highly inadequate, it got me to thinking." He conducted a "quiet" market auction to get a sense of the company's value, then asked IMP if it was still interested. It was. The deal—"good for everyone, including existing management"—closed on April 30, 2015.

Which was a good thing because, on April 1, 2015, Steve Parker became chair of the newly created Nova Scotia Health Authority Board, a group charged with the impossible task of amalgamating nine regional health authorities (operating 10 hospitals, 35 community and health-related locations and 23,400 employees) into one smoothly running enterprise.

Although it's technically a volunteer position, Parker now spends about 30 hours a week on health authority work, and "it looks like it will be busier this year than last."

Which means... Parker's CCL Group is currently sitting on a pile of cash. While he's not looking to be the hands-on, day-to-day operator of another company, he admits he'd like to find "one or two more opportunities" for investing, with good management teams already in place but needing financing, strategic advice or communications support.

Steve Parker still isn't ready to retire completely.

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Steve Parker may seem like the quintessential Nova Scotian, but he was born and raised in Ontario. Then he landed a job with the Halifax Board of Trade, and the rest is history.



Surprisingly, Steve Parker believes his communications empire "would not be thriving if I was still the owner-operator." Besides seismic shifts in mass media and social media," he notes: "the head offices that used to be here are mostly gone. Chris Keevil [who bought Colour] spends half his life in New York. I wasn't prepared to do that."

Parker has taken on a number of "big-fix" volunteer public service tasks. In 1995, the Liberal government asked him to shepherd the IWK Health Centre-Grace Maternity Hospital through a major merger. Four years later, the PCs came calling, asking him to manage the sale of the assets of Nova Scotia Resources Limited (\$420 million) to the private sector.



On Canada's health care challenge: "We have a system built for another time... a different society and different needs."

