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Sarah Schaale/Medill

Tranel Financial Group President Roch

Tranel, in the firm's London conference

room, began working as a financial planner

in his home 20 years ago. The business

has grown to managing nearly \$300 million

in assets.

Libertyville financial group marks two decades of stable growth, client focus

by [Sarah Schaale](#)

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When it comes to appointments people dread facing, financial planning may be right up there with the dentist or a yearly physical. But one Libertyville financial planning and asset management firm is celebrating 20 years of trying to change that.

Tranel Financial Group Ltd., led by President Roch Tranel, sees itself as a deviation from white-walled, transaction-based financial planners you might find in the yellow pages. Perhaps it's because he majored in sociology and never worked in the financial planning business before starting his firm.

Its office alone certainly isn't standard. Kids have their own room to play in while mom and dad crunch numbers. The walls are a calming blue with murals of seemingly financially-satisfied people hiking through beaches and mountains, with messages that a better life is just on the horizon of pecuniary organization.

"Financial services are a mentality. You can't see it, you can't touch it," said Tranel, 43, who began the business out of his home in 1988. "The imagery, I hope, gives people something to take with them, to understand that we do what we do to help them experience a better life."

Beyond the murals, Tranel's conference rooms where advisors meet with clients, are destinations – such as London, New York, Acapulco – and adorned accordingly. Tranel said telling a client that they'll be meeting in London that day helps them be comfortable in an environment many may find the opposite.

"It helps break the ice," Tranel said. "People can look at [mural of a London street] and say, 'I stood right there on my vacation last year,' or 'I was pick-pocketed on that corner.'"

"It helps them identify with us," said Eric Cima, vice president. Visiting a financial planner "can be as exciting as going to the dentist. We just try to liven it up and have a little more fun."

The group's vibrant offices at 1509 N. Milwaukee Ave. weren't always such. Beginning with no assets to manage and built mostly through referrals, the group today manages nearly \$300 million in assets, with its revenue increasing 15 percent to 20 percent each year for the last five years. Its 32 employees, who serve primarily Lake County and northern Cook County residents, include six advisors, a real estate expert and a "life commitment team."

Nancy Bradison, who moved near Orlando, Fla. to retire but maintains her portfolio at Tranel, said she and her husband, Gene, get a kick out of Tranel's unique offices. She said they've stuck with Tranel because he proved trustworthy during her nerve-wracking search for a financial planner.

"I was very frank, I told him I didn't want him to steal our money," Bradison said. "But he's done right by us. He's the reason we retired."

Bradison, 62, added that Tranel was patient through setting up their portfolio, and the entire staff followed suit.

"Every time I have a concern, I pick up the phone, and they've always been there," Bradison said.

Tranel has always taken time to explain complicated money matters, said Bunny Pitts, a Beach Park resident who, with husband Fred, has been a Tranel client since about 2000. She said Tranel is interested in getting to know his clients, and to building their portfolios accordingly.

"He knows Fred is a worrywart," she said. "He worries about the market, so he gears us toward the safer side rather than quick gains."

Pitts said she's seen the same in other clients as well.

"We've gone to weddings of other clients that Roch was there," she said. "They've grown that close with him."

Tranel attributes the group's success in part to its dedication to clients and following up with them, something he said many financial planners don't do.

A "faithful watch" manager checks in with clients every four to six months to see if it's time to reassess their portfolio.

Feedback from clients on what they liked and didn't like has helped mold business practices as well, Tranel said. He said the Tranel team makes an effort to tailor each meeting to that particular client.

"It could be as simple as remembering what kind of tea a client prefers during our meetings or remembering that they only like investing into environmentally-friendly mutual funds," Tranel said. "We incorporate that into the meeting."

Maintaining the dedication to clients is what Tranel hopes will propel the group into adding 2,500 more clients by 2012. He said he hopes to eventually reach \$1 billion in assets under management by expanding his team and its business plan to meet changing demographics and needs.

"In order to continue growing, we need to recruit high-quality individuals, because in the end, it's not so much about valuables as it is about values," Tranel said.

He said it was a challenge to build a team with good people who also have the right qualifications for the job. Constructing a strong team is another contributor to success, he said, and taking care of that team is equally important.

Tranel's assistant, Natalie Blatnick said she's always felt taken care of as an employee. After a recent car accident, she said she came into the office shaken up, and Tranel called her insurance company and took her to the emergency room.

"You don't get that in a big corporate office," Blatnick said.

Cima said weekly meetings with the staff – dubbed "Monday morning success meetings" – allow employees to feel valued and let voices be heard within the small group.

"If you've got an idea, we're going to listen to it, and if all possible, implement it," Cima said.

"We view employees on the team as an investment, not as an expense," Tranel said. "It's like opening your mail – you treat an investment statement totally different than you treat a bill."

Despite economic uncertainty, Tranel said his company has remained stable, and that he thinks clients need financial planning more in indeterminate times. He and Cima said the group has the ability to decide if external factors will affect it.

"A recruiter asked us how it was going with the recession," Cima said. "And we said, 'Oh, we decided not to participate in that. We're still going to grow, we're still going to succeed.'"

Tranel said remaining competitive means being open to learning – whether from clients, the industry or anything that could affect them.

"The minute we shut that down, we're done," he said. "Someone's going to blow by and smoke us."



Sarah Schaale/Medill

The firm's seminar room at its

Libertyville office stands out with murals

illustrating a "better life," one of

Tranel's mantras.

INFO BOX

Company: Tranel Financial Group Ltd.

Business: financial planning and asset management

Founded: 1988

Founder and president: Roch Tranel

Headquarters: Libertyville

Assets under management: Nearly \$300 million

Average annual revenue growth: 15 percent to 20 percent

Employees: 32

Web site: www.tranelfinancialgroup.com

