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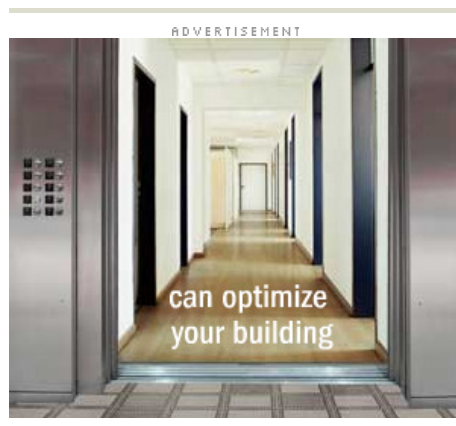
Meet Inc. Innovator: Michelle Devine Giese

VP of nonprofit hopes to make company work like for-profit

BY MAUREEN WALLENFANG • POST-CRESCENT STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

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Q A Kimberly-Clark executive founded this nonprofit, and K-C has been a huge client. Now that K-C business has shrunk, how does that affect you?



A At one point it was 90 percent of our business. Over the last couple of years it's gone down to about 60 percent. As they do different things within their organization, that will continue to decrease business for us.

Q You've got about 70 to 80 transitional employees?

A That's only because that's the work we have. Our capacity is 120. We try not to have layoffs. We have waiting lists of people who want employment. If we had the work for 120 people, that's what we would have.

Q With work harder to find, you and company CEO Hugh Holly are both taking the eSeed

course to retool the company. Did you have to go back to square one?

A We did. We had to totally change our thinking. We'd been in existence for 24, 25 years underneath one set up. We had to think differently, almost like a brand-new startup company. (Retired K-C exec) Kathi Seifert referred us to the Venture Center and to hook up with Amy (Pietsch, Venture Center director). We had to think what were our strategic plans for the company? Where did we want to go? What did we need to do to get there? Part of it is looking at our whole marketing. Our sales. We're getting all new collateral — pamphlets, brochures, direct mailers — for brand recognition.

Q You're recreating your image?

A Or getting it done for the first time. This is the first time we've tried to diversify this much and get our name out there. We've never done much for advertising. A lot of people say, "I've never heard of you." That's bad.

Q How are you getting your name out there?

A Octoberfest. Adopt a highway. We have an ad in "Insight on Manufacturing" for the first time. We're asking people for help. We're joining organizations that we've never joined before, like BPW. Cheryl Fritz, head of our sales, is in Women in Business. We go to a lot for things for New North.

Q Is this, in essence, to save this organization?

A Yes. If we don't grow the business we're going to lose the business. We've gone from having two facilities in Neenah to consolidating to one. We used to have facilities in Stevens Point and Fond du Lac. We still have a small plant in Milwaukee that we're really trying to help grow. There are 10 employees there.



Michelle Devine Giese, vice president and chief operating officer of Step Industries, is seen at the nonprofit's Neenah packaging facility last week. Photo for The P-C by Wm. Glasheen

INNOVATOR INSIGHTS

Work adage

"Our mantra is work hard, stay straight, be patient and good things will happen."

Recognition

"Logo recognition has been my push. That was not thought of as being big before. We got all of our staff clothing with logos. We got employees bags with logos. We got Post-It notes, pens, things to give to people to keep us in front of them."

Diversification

"We'd like to start a call center. We know there is a need for people to do calling. We think that's a good skill for our employees to have when they leave here and move on to a career."

Know a young entrepreneur? Send Inc. Innovator nominations to pcbusiness@postcrescent.com.

MICHELLE DEVINE GIESE

Title: Vice president and chief operating officer of Step Industries
Address: 1010 Strohmeier Drive, Town of Neenah

Type of business: Nonprofit vocational rehab facility for alcoholics and drug addicts. Offers training and transitional employment. Primarily takes in outsourcing work — mostly repackaging, inspections, reclaim, store display assembly and die cutting — from area companies. Employees do work in-house. Has an ISO 9001-2000 certification. Organization has no government funding, but does apply for grants and is otherwise self-supporting.

Company's start: Founded by Kimberly-Clark executive John Hellweg in 1982

Number of employees: 19 in permanent staff; transitional employee work force typically ranges from 70 to 80; those employees have primarily been referred by treatment centers.
Devine Giese's background: Age 37, originally from Owen, Wis. and grew up in Appleton. Now resident of Town of Vinland. Has been with Step Industries for 12 years. Has a bachelor's degree in business administration and human resources management from University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Web site: www.stepindustries.com

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Two years ago there were 19 to 20. A lot of that business has gone to Mexico. Our peak (volume) was \$5.1 million to last year's \$3.8 million, a 25 percent decrease. In the last nine months, we have lost work for about 26 people due to customer reorganization or exporting the assembly process.

Q What do you need to change to move forward?

A We've never done any type of networking or advertising saying, "We're here. We exist." We've always just gone about our business in the background quietly. Part of recovery is pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Getting it done. Being independent. The pride in that. Sometimes false pride has hurt us.

Q What is your personal role in this?

A ISO certification is recognized in the manufacturing world. I wanted that for our company. It gave us credibility. Outside people audit your quality systems, your purchasing, every job file, that you're doing everything you say you're doing and you're doing it to certain standards. We were certified two years ago. It's quite an accomplishment with transitional employees because we're constantly training people. I wrote all the procedures and got us through the whole process. We went from having nothing in writing to everything we do is in writing. I wanted us to have that certification. It says something.

Maureen Wallenfang: 920-993-1000, ext. 287, or mwallenfang@postcrescent.com

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