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BUSINESS PULSE SURVEY:

Projecting the right image

Thinking -- and acting -- big helped Jayne Edison increase Office Furniture Innovations' annual revenue more than 450 percent in one year

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Craig H. Hartley/HBJ

Jayne Edison of Office Furniture Innovations: 'You have to act successful.'

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The furniture in the 2,000-square-foot showroom at Office Furniture Innovations LLC is sleek, stylish and modern -- an image Jayne Edison, through years of fine tuning, has built for her company as well.

The sole owner of OFI, a full-service furniture management company, Edison is an energetic figure with a talent for coming up with innovative ways to get her company's name out.

And judging from OFI's numbers, clients are getting the message loud and clear.

OFI topped the list of Fastest-Growing Woman-Owned Businesses in the Houston Business Journal's 2007 Book of Lists, with a massive 464.7 percent increase in revenue from 2004 to 2005. Annual revenue grew during that time to \$15 million from \$2.6 million.

Since its creation in 1999, OFI's success has been a classic example of the importance of a small company projecting a big company image and attitude.

Edison worked in the commercial office furniture industry for 20 years before starting her own company.

In charge of the commercial and office division of a large office supply and furniture company, she had been collaborating with a design firm for two years on supplying furniture to the new Harris County Criminal Justice Center in 1999. But just as the company she worked for was about to make a bid, it pulled the plug.

That's when the manufacturers Edison had been working with on the bid suggested she take on the project herself. Edison says they even offered to help finance her initial business expenses. The manufacturers supplied her with a 12-month, interest-free start-up loan and, within six weeks of OFI being up and running, Edison had landed the \$4.5 million Justice Center project.

OFI was on its way, but competing with the big-name furniture companies was going to be an uphill battle.

For the first four years, Edison ran the business from a closet at her home -- something her competitors never failed to bring up when vying for a job, she says. But Edison stuck to her plan and, with the help of a small but dedicated staff, quickly learned the importance of creating a successful image for her company.

It's all about attitude, she says.

"Think big. You might be working in that closet today, but think big," Edison says. "Don't think that you're working out of the closet. Don't think that you're working out of your home. And don't put it to the public that that is what you are doing. Put out to the public what you can do."

Edison's reputation as a top seller at her past employers and a host of accreditations from business associations also helped win over many of her clients.

As OFI got more jobs, Edison's close relationship with manufacturers continued to pay off. OFI was able to finance many of her larger projects with the help of the furniture-makers, which carried the cost interest-free and helped Edison bond the projects from an insurance and securities standpoint.

But image means little without the results to back it up. Edison attributes OFI's reputation as a reliable business partner to her staff, who she describes as "an office full of leaders." She says her management style is hands off; that a good leader will trust her employees to know what to do when problems crop up.

"If you have confidence in your employees and the job that they do for you, you let them make decisions," Edison says. "That helps employees grow and, by helping them grow, your entire business will grow with you."

To grow a successful company takes passion -- and a few good friends. For eight years now, Edison has pushed OFI to the top, garnering a reputation as a reliable, strong-willed businesswoman with a talent for keeping the logistics running smoothly. In time, OFI landed a number of high-profile projects such as Houston's Federal Reserve Building, supplying furniture for Ikon Office Solutions' Houston offices and a number of major Harris County courthouses.

"She's a marketing master," says Brad Lowe, owner of Dick Lowe and Associates of Texas Inc., a Houston-based manufacturer's representative for contract and educational furniture. "She never quits; she's very determined with what she does. She's going to make sure the customer is taken care of."

Lowe, who has known Edison for nearly 20 years, says that finding clients won't be an obstacle for OFI -- Edison has that covered. The biggest challenge will be growing too fast.

Edison's networking secret, she says, is using creativity to market her company. In the beginning, by presenting her home-run business as a high-powered, high-priced furniture dealer, Edison was able to land projects and compete with the largest of furniture companies.

Edison's biggest ideas were two charity functions staged by OFI together with Saks Fifth Avenue and Marmi, a high-end chain shoe store. The two annual events, "Martinis at

Marmi's" and "Sak's Designers on Parade" were instant hits, not only raising toys and much-needed funds for charity, but also OFI's stature.

"What the public thought from those two events was that I was this great, big, cash-rich company," Edison says. "I wasn't, I just thought out of the box and brought industry partners together."

Edison got funding for the events through industry partners, devoting OFI's time to organizing the charity functions.

"We were very blessed that Saks Fifth Avenue and Marmi's donated their facilities," Edison says. "They put the party on because the architectural and design community was a community that they wanted to attract, too. Some people call it synergy."

Crafting the image of a confident, forward-thinking company is crucial to growing your business in an extremely competitive environment, Edison says. When trying to land bids against larger companies with a vast amount of resources, Edison says, entrepreneurs often have to take risks and be willing to go to extremes to ace that first impression.

One such example was when OFI was competing to supply office furniture to Houston's new Federal Reserve building on Allen Parkway. The project's architect was well-known New York-based Michael Graves, who also happened to have a line of housewares carried by Target stores.

Told by Graves' firm that OFI was the smallest company competing on the project and that it probably was not going to be in the running, Edison decided to get creative, cleaning out the local Target and stocking her temporary showroom with Graves' wares.

"I went to Target and bought everything Michael Graves," Edison says. "So when they walked into the showroom that they were representing, instead of them thinking of OFI as a company that worked out of their home, they looked around and saw all the products that they helped design. No one else did that."

Conscious of the bottom line, though, after the mock-up process was over, Edison returned almost all the purchases to Target.

"We didn't have \$1,000 to spend doing all these things," Edison says. "But that's what set us apart from our competitors."

The effort paid off, and OFI was awarded the job.

Edison's ability to market her company, from its infancy, as a top-notch player in the Houston office furniture industry didn't go unnoticed by her peers.

"We began to have manufacturers come to us wanting us to sell their products because they were losing so much business," Edison says. "It was kind of like, 'instead of getting kicked in the teeth, why don't we join them.' "

Today, OFI enjoys a close business relationship with a number of former competitors.

"OFI is Jayne," says Dwaine Saalman, vice president of strategic accounts at Kimball International Inc., a Jasper, Ind.-based furniture manufacturer. "What sets her apart is truly her marketing acumen. She communicates to the marketplace, and she is just extremely passionate."

Kimball was once a competitor to OFI but, after meeting with Edison at an industry function in New Orleans five years ago, Saalman decided the best course of action was to team up with the rapidly growing company. Kimball helped OFI move into and supply the furniture showroom it has today, which recently doubled in size.

"She has some exceptional relationships," Saalman says. "Our motivation was to grow our respective businesses mutually in those relationships."

The Kimball/OFI relationship has paid off handsomely for both, and Saalman believes that, with Edison at the helm, OFI has nowhere to go but up.

"As people get to know Jayne and understand her passion, they are only going to want to do business with her," Saalman says. "I wouldn't want to put any limits on where I thought she was going to be in five years."

In the near future, Edison says her biggest goal is to make OFI a \$25 million to \$30 million company.

Edison says her drive to see OFI succeed and prosper comes from both a competitive and entrepreneurial spirit. Growing a \$15 million company out of your closet isn't easy, she adds, but with the right attitude it's definitely possible.

"Think about the great things you've done. Position yourself on what you've done that's great," Edison says. "Don't think you are working out of your home and don't act like it. That's the key. You have to act successful. You have to dress it, you have to act it, and you have to project it. You have to give your clients confidence."

Office Furniture Innovations LLC

Business: Full-service furniture management company

Top executive: Jayne Edison, owner.

Founded: 1999

Employees: 11

Revenue

• 2004: \$2.66 million

• 2005: \$15 million

Web site: www.ofillc.com

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