

# Valley Business Report

Pro-Valley...Pro-Business

Celebrating Our 2nd Year  
[www.ValleyBusinessReport.com](http://www.ValleyBusinessReport.com)

Volume III, Issue 1

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September 2011

## PET CARE EXPANDS

**P**ets keep us company and entertain us. In return, we do everything we can to keep them happy and healthy.

*See page 5*







# THE VALLEY'S TEAM!

## 2011-2012 SEATING MAP

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Single Game	Full Season
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# TWO YEARS AND WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN

"Where did the time go? Life just goes faster and faster." We say this all the time. We hear it daily. Because we're all busier than a one-armed wallpaper hanger, the years seem to be flying faster than the speed of light.

The same goes for us at Valley Business Report. For the last two years, you have given us a reason to write. You have supplied VBR with economic success stories to share with fellow business leaders. It is almost impossible to comprehend how fast these first two years have passed.

When the late Kevin Knoch and I sat down in a local hotel lobby to discuss this publication's origin, content, distribution, etc., it was early summer 2009, and we were going through much of what we have faced this summer: extreme heat and drought. Some things never change.

But what does change is how the Rio Grande Valley business community adjusts to economic conditions. We are a resilient people. Falling on our face is bound to happen. And when we do, there's only one direction to go.

When trouble intensified across the River,

savvy local businesses figured out ways to benefit. One obstacle means another door of opportunity opens. Doors actually opened as new residential developments offered new homes to our family and friends from Mexico who have relocated to the Rio Grande Valley. New businesses have opened. It's a fact: new dollars are in our area and south Texas is creating new jobs and opportunities. We have been challenged to improve and to be more efficient.

Certainly, we all feel the pressure of the country's recession, from Wall Street to the debt ceiling. Our local economy isn't a mirror to the national statistics. Thank God! The Rio Grande Valley is leading the U.S. in several areas. Many stores here lead the country in retail sales; our low cost of living invites new residents and new jobs; the list goes on and on. Plus, we are fortunate to have many natural resources to aid in our region's success.

Valley Business Report was created to promote the positives. Whining about the negatives is counter-productive. Our philosophy is to share economic

development news with business leaders encouraging local trade. All behavior is emulated. It makes more sense if we want positive change to publicize positive news. Focusing on growth, profiling success stories and highlighting innovation and entrepreneurship is a more effective method of stimulating the local economy. Our job at VBR is to share with you the products and services that our available from your neighbors.

You have supported our cause since September of 2009, and for this – we thank you! We appreciate your reading and sponsoring Valley Business Report, VBR e-Brief and [www.valleybusinessreport.com](http://www.valleybusinessreport.com). Give us your input. Tell us the Valley's good news! Pro-business news is what we do.

Todd Breland  
General Manager  
Valley Business Report  
VBR e-Brief  
[todd@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:todd@valleybusinessreport.com)  
[www.valleybusinessreport.com](http://www.valleybusinessreport.com)

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

## Valley Business Report Staff

### *Editor*

Eileen Mattei

[eileen@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:eileen@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *General Manager*

Todd Breland

[todd@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:todd@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Marketing Consultant*

Cori Thomas

[cori@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:cori@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Production Art Director*

Sharon Campbell

[sharon@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:sharon@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Editor, VBR e-Brief*

Angey Murray

[angey@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:angey@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Web Design*

MPC Studios

**Philosophy:** We are a pro-business publication providing in-depth perspectives on business trends and creating a forum in which business leaders can exchange ideas and information affecting the local community's economy.

**Letters to the Editor:** Letters of 300 words or less should be e-mailed to [editorial@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:editorial@valleybusinessreport.com) with the subject line: Letter to the Editor. Please include your full name and city of residence.

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Office: 956-310-8953 • P.O. Box 2332 Mission, Texas 78573



# Pharr

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## Pharr Completes Wastewater Collection System Project

The Pharr City Commission has just approved the 100% completion of a 3 1/2 year, \$38 million dollar wastewater collection system project. This system is critical in preventing sanitary sewer overflows, which in turn allows sound collection and disposal of wastewater properly, that is absolutely essential for the long-term growth of the City of Pharr. The wastewater collection system will maintain the strict standards of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). The system transports wastewater to the City Wastewater

Treatment Plant which is currently undergoing improvements. This is one of many exciting projects that the City of Pharr has put into place to continue to grow the City's infrastructure and provide quality services to the good people of Pharr.

Congratulations to City Commission, City Manager Fred Sandoval, Asst. City Manager David Garza and the Public Utilities Department for their vision, commitment and completion of this significant project.



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# FOR THE LOVE OF A PET

By Eileen Mattei

Have you noticed that most pets have human names now? You hear more dogs, cats, birds and goats addressed as Jack, Leo, Olivia or Ozzie and fewer called Chief, Shadow or Fluffy. Americans love their pets and are expected to spend over \$50 billion on them in 2011. In the Valley dozens of businesses cater to animals and their owners, from groomers and pet supply stores to veterinary clinics, pet walkers and pet cemeteries.

Sixty-two percent of American households have at least one pet. Those households account for 78 million dogs and 86 million cats, plus millions of fish and birds. Our attachment to pets is evident in Harley-Davidson's branded pet clothing and the doggie fountains installed in Valley parks. Half of American pet owners consider their animals part of the family and spare no expense on their medical and nutritional care.

"I hear people say their dogs are better behaved than their children or that they are closer to them than their kids," Pretty Paws owner Chris Morris said. "Pets are like their four-legged children and people take good care of them."

Morris opened her pet grooming and spa service two years ago after managing a veterinarian's office for 12 years. "It was time to be my own boss. I love animals and this was something I could do easily and open up quickly," she said.



Dr. Allison Tewell-Merritt enjoys one perk of being a vet—taking her dog to work every day. (Mattei)

Nail trimming and haircuts, baths and spa package facials are just the start of pampering pooches and other pets. "Mohawks are in right now, and people are getting into pet hair dyes and nail art with decals. We do bling on nails just like mommy has."

Morris prefers a small, three-person operation like hers, because she gets to talk to every client. She points out bumps and lumps and bugs she has found to the pet owner. "People don't always know that something is a problem."

A Pretty Paws sign notes that dog haircuts cost more than people's for 10 reasons including the facts that people rarely bite their hairdressers and they have brushed and washed their hair since the last time they had it done professionally. Yet people willingly spend money on their pets. "Quite a few dogs get groomed every two weeks, especially those of older clients who can't handle baths or nail trimming at home," Morris said. She stopped to talk calmly yet firmly to a chow that was being shampooed in a deep tub. Male dogs leave with a scarf tied around their neck while females get bows on their ears.

This fall Morris's company will open Furry Friends Animal Hospital next door, addressing a need she has seen for additional vets with more economical pricing.

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Allison Tewell-Merritt's father Dr. Howard Tewell bought the San Benito Animal Hospital when she was 10. She soon realized she had inherited his love for animals. Dr. Tewell-Merritt, whose father died in her last year of veterinary school, bought the practice and continued the family tradition.

Whether it's a purebred dog from a kennel or a mixed breed from the Humane Society, a pet is often a person's closest companion. "Especially people who don't have kids or their kids are off to college, they want their pets treated like family," Dr. Tewell-Merritt said. Chihuahuas are the most numerous of indoor breeds she sees, while pit bulls outnumber the other outdoor dogs. Responsible pet ownership includes spaying or neutering and making sure that dogs get heartworm medication. The endemic disease is transmitted by mosquitos and can kill dogs.

Some vet clinics like Mission Veterinary Hospital, offer ultrasound diagnostics, while others specialize in specific animal surgeries.



A young 4-H helper from La Feria holds onto a dog up for adoption. (Mattei)



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Animals Galore is known for its holistic, non-gluten pet foods, according to manager J.B. Walters, whose sister Irazema Walters has owned the business for 20 years. “The majority of our clients come in for first time asking why their dog is scratching so much. They come back after trying one of our natural foods for a month and say the dog does not have excessive shedding or scratching anymore.”

The store carries guinea pigs (“A good starter pet for young children or someone in an apartment) along with specialized shampoos and dog tee-shirts and hoods. “Because nowadays doggies have to have a wardrobe too,” Walters said. “Dogs aren’t usually chained up outside anymore.” Instead they have comfy beds and carriers and lots of attention.

“I try to go beyond running a pet store,” Walters said after talking to people who had found a wild turtle. He told them they needed to release the Texas tortoise to the wild. Texas Parks & Wildlife visits Animals Galore and other pet stores regularly to make sure things are on the up and up, such as having health certificates on breeder-raised parrots.



**Grooming costs more for pets than people because people don't usually growl at their hairdressers.**  
(Mattei)

**FINDING A PET**

“My husband and I have done animal rescue for 15 years,” said Linda Smith. “Smith Ranch Kennels is just an extension of our love for animals.” The kennels, on 25 acres outside of Los Fresnos,

boards dogs only. It does not breed them.

Smith works with Brownsville Paws and the Humane Society of Harlingen trying to find homes for rescued animals. She brought dogs to Tractor Supply in San Benito for the store’s first pet adoption day. “People know they are looking for a collie or a big dog or an inside dog,” she said. She handed out applications to people interested in adopting one of the dogs. “I’m relatively picky on where I place a dog. I don’t want them coming back.” She suggested people look on petfinders.com for dogs available for adoption. Nearby La Feria 4-H Club volunteers maintained a watering station for pets traveling with shoppers and the animals up for adoption.

Inside Tractor Supply, pet supplies account for about 40 percent of the San Benito store’s total sales. “We sell more Pedigree dog food than any other Tractor Supply in the country,” said Stephen Diamond. “Nobody is near us in terms of sales,” about 50 and 60 pallets of 50 pound bags per month.

People are looking for gluten free pet feed, Diamond said. “They have shifted to free choice, letting the pet eat when hungry during the day instead of gobbling it at feeding time.”

Ducks, rabbits, horses, donkeys, goats, reptiles, dogs and cats are pets that win someone’s hearts. Pet owners admire, care for, talk to and most of all enjoy the pleasure of their company.

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**Chris Morris gives Bruce a paw trim.** (Mattei)



# ONE RECIPE FOR BUILDING A DESTINATION

By Eileen Mattei

Little by little, Scott Friedman has created a mini-vacation destination in Port Isabel that includes Texas's longest fishing pier and the state's only pirate ship. Without fanfare over 20 years, Friedman transformed a tiny restaurant and some weedy Laguna Madre frontage into the Pirate's Landing complex. Investing his profits, he acquired buildings one by one on the square around the Port Isabel Lighthouse Historic Site and Lighthouse Keeper's cottage. The destination now includes Pirate's Landing restaurant, Sea Life Center (a hands-on aquarium), Davey Jones Ice Cream Locker, Black Jack's Gallery and the 24-hour pier complete with a bait shop and pole rentals, Black Dragon Pirate Cruises, Thriller speed boat tours and dolphin watching trips plus shop tenants such as Yellow Petals and Mercado Faro.

"We have tried to develop Pirate's Landing into a family destination. You go to the Lighthouse and museum and then have lunch, take ride on the pirate

ship, get ice cream, go shopping, have dinner and go fishing. You can spend a pleasant day with your family," Friedman said. "We've tried to provide a little of everything to appeal to everyone and make it into a semi-resort complex."

The Black Dragon pirate ship, which has been featured in Texas Highways magazine, has become a beach vacation must-do. "It's been a great addition and attraction," Friedman said. Before the Black Dragon sets sail, magicians and comedians entertain the crowd in the deck area with antics that keep adults and kids laughing and shrieking. Nearby the Alchemaille artist crafts knots of stainless steel, and parrots engage passers-by. The shows are free to the public: visitors don't have to be restaurant or ship patrons to sit down and enjoy them.

"Our goal is all you can fit in in a



The Black Dragon pirate cruise is an added attraction at Pirate's Landing. (Mattei)

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perfect day. I think our area is an affordable destination,” Freidman said. While he believes the Valley has been protected from the recession, he’s noticed that people seem to be vacationing on South Padre Island for shorter periods than in previous years. And in the past, while 80 percent of Island and Port Isabel business came from outside the region, currently the visitor mix is 50:50 Valley and non-Valley.

July and February are the best months for tourism, although the visitors in those seasons are “really as different as night and day.” Winter Texans are out all day. Summer tourists are out and about in the afternoon and evening. Both groups enjoy the destination concept.

Twenty-five years ago, David Friedman, Scott’s father, bought Sea Ranch on South Padre Island. Scott worked for him before going out on his own to buy property at the western foot of the Queen Isabella Causeway and open a tiny pizza place. “When I first started, this was weeds and trash and a single window looking out at the bay. I spent six months cleaning up and reinvesting the money back into the business,” Friedman said. Little has changed in his approach of reinvesting and buying buildings as they became available or affordable.

*Pirates have been good to Scott Friedman owner of Pirate's Landing Restaurant and many adjoining businesses. (Mattei)*



Today the Friedmans, including Scott’s brother Bob, collaborate on advertising and purchasing for their individually managed restaurants, separate ventures which now include Pier 19 and Laguna Bob’s. “We continue to work together. We really try to net-

work Pirate’s Landing and Pier 19, the same people go back and forth (patronizing them.)” Pier 19, located over the water, is a family venue like Pirate’s Landing but with a nautical theme instead of the Jolly Roger motif. They have similar affordable menus with the entertainment at Pier 19 including face painting and weekend fireworks. Sea Ranch provides a more upscale dining, but that is a smaller market.

Friedman said he tries to change his menus slightly every quarter. “That is challenging because some regulars come in looking for their favorites, the same thing as 20 years ago, and other people want to try something new. We try to add and subtract two items each time.” But shrimp, snapper and Laguna Madre oysters will always be on the menu.

Friedman himself joins the tourist throng once in a while. “I enjoy traveling and picking up ideas and artifacts and bringing them back for people to enjoy here. I go to boutiques and flea markets.” Otherwise, he pointed out one sure way to identify a Port Isabel and South Padre business owner. “They don’t have a tan. I live on the beach and I go about twice a year.”

Pirate’s Landing, located on the site of a long-ago ferry service to the island, spelled potential to Friedman and prompted him to invest his time and money. “We are still looking ahead. You have to be,” he said. “We have plans to expand the fishing pier and put up new buildings and add new retail.” Scott Friedman, intent on improving what he has devoted years to build, will keep pushing the limit.

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# EVERY STORY NEEDS A PICTURE

By Eileen Mattei

Every professional should have a portrait of themselves on hand.

My third book (*Leading the Way: McAllen First 100 Years*) came out in June. I was embarrassed that the author's photo was the same one I used for books one and two. In the four years since that picture was taken, my hair has grown longer and my face is, um, fuller. And I am still wearing that dress.

In contrast, each time author Mary Higgins Clark completes another mystery, she buys a piece of expensive jewelry to wear in her updated author photograph.

Image, like it or not, is very important in almost every business.

People want to look competent and trustworthy when dealing with clients, subordinates and superiors. They care enough about their image to put on a good face when meeting the public. A professional portrait should be an essential part of your personal toolbox: it's one more way to keep networking without being in the room.

"For today's social media, LinkedIn and Facebook, you need a good photograph," said Rebecca Rivera of Rebecca Rivera Photography in Mission. "People with knowledge in the field of portraiture can make a big difference in how you look. Professional lighting makes a head shot look 100 times better." Rivera, a member of the Professional Photographers of America, shot all the photographs for the book *Valley Places, Valley Faces: A Portrait of the Rio Grande Valley*. She specializes in contemporary and artistic portraits. Recently, a national magazine hired her to take photographs of a local physician being featured in a story. After that experience, the doctor had Rivera take photographs of all his office staff to be placed on the About Us section of the practice's website.

It is always better to have control over the image used of you. That means being able to supply an image that was taken under the best of circumstances. You will find that your professional photograph will be useful far beyond the company website, an office lineup or your LinkedIn page. Whenever you are interviewed for an industry publication or write a column for a publication like *Valley Business Report*, you will be asked to provide a headshot. If you have a good portrait on hand, you can supply it when you are giving a

presentation at an industry event. The photo will be available when a press release goes out about your achievements and appointments to civic and industry boards.

People like to identify a name with a face. For one thing, it helps people whose memory for faces is not good. That said, schedule a new portrait every year or two. The goal is to have people recognize you from the photo rather than remark about the changes since the last one was taken.

Rivera said a scheduled professional portrait session lasts about 30 minutes. She takes 10 to 15 different shots either in her studio or in a corporate setting. "I suggest formal and less formal poses, depending on their business and what they plan to use the portrait for," she said. She has photographed federal judges, other photographers, bank officers, grocery store personnel, medical staff and board members. Realtors, she has found, usually want a photo to go on their business card.

Depending on the package purchased, portrait customers can receive compressed digital photo files suitable for web applications along with a photograph printed by a professional photo lab. Clients can also opt for "all rights" to use their full resolution images supplied on a CD in a format handy for everything from press releases to poster size photos. One of Rivera's portraits has been used on a Valley billboard.

Before sitting for my portrait four years ago, I remember going to the dentist to have my teeth whitened so I would look my best. Later, Rivera told me I needn't have to go to that trouble: "I could have Photoshopped it for you, if you'd asked."

Now that I am writing another book, *The History of Medicine in the Rio Grande Valley*, I intend to make an appointment for a new author's portrait...once I find a new dress.



Portrait of Rebecca Rivera, taken by her young daughter. (courtesy)


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# WESLACO JAZZES UP CITY DEVELOPMENT

By Eileen Mattei

Weslaco Economic Development Corporation has an ambitious goal of reinventing Weslaco's downtown in the next 24 months. Getting 100 percent occupancy of the storefronts on Texas Boulevard is the cornerstone of the reinvention plan developed by Hernan Gonzales, EDC Executive Director.

Downtown Weslaco has experienced spurts of revitalization in its central business district in the past. In 1998, Larry and Patti Dittburner resuscitated the Hotel Cortez, a historic landmark. Annabel Cardona has overseen the tremendous growth of Valley Grande Institute in six downtown buildings, and WORD recently transformed a vintage bank building into a mixed use complex of offices and restaurant. Downtown's long-established businesses include Wells department store, Cisneros Jewelry and Lionel's Western Wear. Mimi's Attic,

Jitters Coffee House and the Weslaco Museum are newer additions to the downtown scene.

The new Weslaco 100 Plan is far more extensive, involves a greater financial commitment from the EDC and serves a loftier goal than previous revitalization efforts. "It's a positioning statement, if you will," said Alicia Aguilar, business retention and marketing director. Revitalizing downtown encourages people to see the entire community of 35,000 in a new way. Alfresco Weslaco, a recently launched monthly jazz and art on the downtown street festival, is a major component of the city's economic development, introducing people to Weslaco as a great place to live and work.

Weslaco's downtown has been able to tap into an EDC grant program for façade upgrades. But too many vacant buildings were not up to code and there was next to no chance that tenants would occupy them as is. Under the Weslaco 100 Plan, matching grants have been made available to property owners to upgrade South Texas Blvd. buildings by bringing electrical, plumbing and structural elements up to code. "We want those buildings rented. There are too many vacancies, and we want these owners to call us," Aguilar said. That's



*The historic Villa de Cortez started Weslaco's original downtown revitalization. "The big picture now is we're using downtown as the anchor for economic development. Weslaco is investing in itself," said Hernan Gonzales, EDC head. (Mattei)*

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why the EDC doubled its annual commitment to \$100,000 with a \$25,000 matching limit. Façade grants are available to businesses on adjoining streets and along Business 83.

Weslaco Alfresco and Weslaco 100 are part of one master plan. "We're doing this for the city as a whole. The gravy is it benefits downtown merchants," Aguilar said.

The non-profit Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council this summer leased the Railroad Street home of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce, Visitors Center and the EDC. The move brought 75 new jobs to Weslaco and let the EDC proceed with its long term



plan to develop more of downtown east along the railroad tracks. Architects Boultinghouse and Simpson designed a new business and visitors center and EDC and chamber offices that should be ready for occupancy in seven months in Phase I. Under Phase II, an adjoining event center should be opening in 2013.

Weslaco Alfresco aims to create a community ambiance to attract companies that want to employ a happy workforce. And Weslaco is successfully attracting companies: Mid-Valley Industrial Park has leased space to TD Industries, a mechanical and facilities service company that is rated among the 100 best places to work. Southeastern Freight is building a \$3 million terminal, and Constucciones Marquines is building four warehouses there.

“We believe they are choosing Weslaco for all kinds of reasons, not only location but how we are positioning ourselves, the image that comes across,” Aguilar said. “We want business and industry to see Weslaco as a cool place. Arts and culture is a cornerstone of downtown. That is why the event center is going in.”



Alicia Aguilar, right, talks to woman interested in opening a downtown boutique. (attei)

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# SARAH BOOK PUBLISHING GETS THE WORD OUT

By Eileen Mattei

Dr. Oladayo Sanusi was not happy with his experiences in the world of self-publishing. The author's increasing aggravation over the publication of his three books became the inspiration behind Sarah Book Publishing. The full service publishing company opened in Brownsville this summer. While the nephrologist contributes ideas, Sarah Book Publishing is under the firm guidance of CEO Cherry Sanusi, the writer's wife and the one with the degree in business.

"Writers need a place to get their work published," Cherry Sanusi said. "Our focus is to provide the extra personal service that is not available from many publishers today. We want to produce fine books and fine authors. That is the goal we want to reach. We are in not this for the money, but for the big picture."

Sarah Book provides for online submission of manuscripts, their review and evaluation and editorial services without money up front. Two editors are on contract to provide the guidance that authors need to give their books a professional polish. The contracts between authors and Sarah Book are sensitive to the

writer's situation. The author retains copyright of the book, while Sarah owns the publishing right for only seven years. Sarah pays between 12.5 and 15 percent in royalties, which is considerably higher than standard arrangements. The company publishes both print and digital books.

"There is a book in everyone. Every soul has a book," Sanusi said. "When the resources area available, people start to think. By marketing a publishing company, by marketing artists, it stimulates other people to bring out the book in them."

While Sarah is committed to promoting local authors, its market reach is global. Among its first books are "The Big Spin" by a Las Vegas casino employee, "Growing Up Southern," by a Mississippi professor and "Sonuvacoach" by a Harlingen doctor. "The word will spread," Sanusi predicted.

The in-house, sister company Digital Print Shoppe is essential for keeping the costs of production down at Sarah Book. "You can't beat our price. We print pretty much everything except money," said Sanusi. Brochures, publications, business cards and booklets are within the print shop's capabilities. Major investments in advanced printing machines--including a large format printer, book finisher and automatic page cutter--assure that Sarah Book turns out quality print job and publications.

Digital Print in turn led to a third sister business: RGV Art Online. The website allows artists to upload their artwork and presents a convenient online shopping portal. Customers can order prints of artists' paintings in a large range of formats and papers. The marketplace is free of charge and lets artists get exposure for their work.

Entrepreneurs like Sanusi keep aware of people's unmet needs. That led her corporation to start a fourth business next door to Sarah Book.

"People need safe and clean storage facilities when relocating," explained Sanusi, who moved with her family from New York to the Valley. "I didn't care for the storage options that I had to choose from, so I started Jonah Storage. It's the kind of facility I would use." With its climate



*Sarah Publishing Offices alongside the Digital Print Shoppe make for convenient printing options for customers. (Mattei)*

control system, it is also valuable for artists.

Sanusi has made a dedicated effort to distinguish her businesses from competitors online. Each business maintains a solid online presence with professionally produced, useful websites. Writers, artists and graphic designers are finding solutions and different ways of getting their works in front of the public with the quartet of these Brownsville-based and web-based companies.



*Cherry Sanusi displays printing capabilities at Sarah Book Publishing offices. (Mattei)*

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## Q & A - TRUE VALUE OF HARD WORK

Johnny and Helen Hess opened Johnny's True-Value in Harlingen in 1972. Despite the cataclysmic shifts in retail since then, the hardware store, a regional fixture nicknamed the Everything Store, has endured and continues to prosper under the current owners, James and Melinda Hess. Valley Business Report's editor talked to James Hess about keeping a retail store viable.

**Q** You started sweeping floors and sidewalks for 25 cents an hour when you were 10 at the family's Western Auto stores. Did you envision a future in the family business?

**A** After graduating from college in 1976, I came to work at Johnny's full time and planned to go to law school. But retail grew on me. I found out I was pretty good at it. I had had two good teachers, my mother and dad.

**Q** You and Melinda bought the business in 1996. Was experience your only collateral?

**A** Luckily I had a banker that believed in me even though we had no money to put down. We are still a family business. My brother John Jr. works here and so does our son J.R.

**Q** Only a handful of independent hardware stores remain in the Valley. How did Johnny's survive the arrival of the big box stores?

**A** With niches. We have several of them, like rod and reel repair and knife sharpening. You don't make money on knife sharpening, but you get someone in the door twice. We make window screens. We have the largest selection of keys for homes and cars and the largest selection of gun safes on the floor. And we're known for having hard to find items right on the shelf. To develop a niche, you need a game plan. I'm not worried about giving away the secrets of success because it takes a long time to develop a niche.

**Q** How much impact did Home Depot's arrival in 1999 have on your store?

**A** In 2000, our income dropped by \$1.2 million. But being a member of the True-Value buying group, I always had people I could call and talk to who had gone through the same thing. I learned a lot. I had to change departments around. That's when I put in Columbia clothing. I extended our Sunday hours. Still, it took me eight years to come back to the same level of retail sales. But the commercial end of our business has always been good because we have a large selection, easy access and quick response.

**Q** Do you think hometown hardware stores succeed because of relationships, knowing your customers and their needs?

**A** I probably have more employees per square foot than the big box stores. My employees are a major asset.

They've been with me long enough to know what we have in stock. They can tell you how to replace a toilet flapper valve or how to rewire a lamp plug. I'm trying to provide service so you don't have to go searching for what you need. I make shopping easy.

**Q** So competition changed what you stocked?

**A** You need to have a good mix of merchandise for males and females. Females do a lot of fixing around the house. Nowadays to compete you have to have connections to volume purchasing. Through the True-Value buying group, we get better prices on everything from calculators to garden tools.

**Q** How do you keep your name out there and your traffic up?

**A** Three percent of our total retail sales goes back into advertising. You've got to be consistent. I concentrate on newspaper inserts and television. You can't spread yourself too thin. You're not going to get anywhere in just three months. But you keep reminding people that you are there and that you have what they need.

**Q** Bass Pro is opening in Harlingen in November. Are you prepared?

**A** It will be like a new restaurant in town. In the be-

ginning, everyone goes there to see what they have and then it settles down. It won't be as bad as Home Depot. We are more diversified.

**Q** You own a Johnny's in Edcouch. Are you still high on retail?

**A** We have purchased property in Edinburg and plan to build another Johnny's. There is a great demand in Edinburg that we can fill.



*James Hess enjoys working with the community at Johnny's True Value Hardware. (Mattei)*

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# THE POSITIVE SIDE OF TERMINATION

By Susan LeMiles Holmes

Early in my career, I was facing a messy situation with an employee that I really liked....as a person. A business associate and trusted advisor gave me some advice that remains with me still. He said, "When you talk about the employee and the problems every day, when you spend measurable time managing this one employee, time that you should be spending managing your business, it is time to fire."

If you are like most people, you would rather get your teeth drilled than fire someone. It is easily the most painful part of a manager's job. Making the right good decision is critical to your company, to you and to the employee in question. The legal, emotional and team implications of termination have to be weighed against the fact that having even one problem employee damages your organization's morale, productivity and reputation.

When the employee has done something dangerous to others or to the company, like committing

a violent act or theft, terminate immediately. It's an easy decision, an obvious necessity. Follow the law and safe termination practices; then fire.

It is the worker that is always "on the bubble," the person with chronic problems that confuses us. Performance and behavior fluctuate enough to keep us off balance, hoping that things will get better. If you want to save the employee, you must isolate the underlying reason behind these recurring problems. Whether it is a training issue, a self-esteem issue, insubordination, conflict with co-workers or simply unhappiness with the job, knowing your own threshold for dealing with the problem is important. Ask yourself, "How long can I wait for improvement?" Figure in the employee's commitment and willingness and the impact his poor attitude or performance has on others inside and outside the company. Add the cost of resources needed to improve the employee's performance plus the time and cost to advertise, interview and train a replacement.

Despite all the times I have heard terminated workers say, "I just can't believe it; this is a total surprise! It is so unfair!" I believe employees do know when they are in danger. And, when danger is perceived, the fight or flight response kicks in. Either way, you will notice that behavior gets worse.

The fight response looks like this. The problem employee will poison relationships by interacting with co-workers, suppliers and customers. It may be easy to see or so subtle that the results catch you by surprise. A constant campaign of malicious politicking, insubordination, intimidation and negativity ensues. And, yes, people do lie. In the worst case, the lies will be about you. This person will do anything to save himself. Follow the law and safe termination practices; then fire.

People who use the flight response become ghosts on the job. Their goal is to drain as much money out of the company as possible and then dare you to fire them. Behavior includes chronic absences, tardiness, missing goals and deadlines, spending excessive time on the phone, instant messaging his friends and even abandoning the work station. Often passive-aggressive behavior like rudeness and "inappropriate treatment of doors" are part of the picture. The employee is miserable at your company, and you are doing him a favor by giving him the push to get a more suitable job elsewhere.

The longer you wait, the harder it is to terminate. The situation drains your energy and wears you

Author **Susan LeMiles Holmes** (courtesy)



down. Your own productivity and creativity suffers; good employees see that you accept bad behavior and poor performance; your best people can leave. A dangerous new normal is established. Follow the law and safe termination practices; then fire.

Being fair means you only dismiss for legitimate reasons, so the question arises, "Can you terminate someone for something that happened during off hours?" It's hard enough to get employees to behave at work and now we have Facebook. It's the instant way to publicize bad judgment, gossip and negativity, including information about your company's business and internal issues.

I want to employ people with good judgment. If someone is wearing my company T-shirt while exhibiting reckless, even illegal behavior or publicly denouncing my company, I can take refuge in the following fact. Often, outrageously bad personal judgment bleeds into bad decision making at work. Currently, the category of "people with bad judgment" is not a "protected class" under any federal or state employment regulations. Of course, we need to pay attention to developing case law as it applies to internet communication. This is a hot, hot, hot topic and I am not a lawyer. These situations will be challenged multiple times in our legal system. Pay attention.

Now, you have tried your best: you have your documentation in order and you are ready to fire with compassion and class. Ahhhhh. Isn't that better? You are having fun at work again, sleeping well at night, no longer spending negative energy on a problem employee.

Congratulations....you faced the dragon!

*Susan LeMiles Holmes is Director of Career Services at Texas State Technical College and a published novelist. After a successful HR consulting career in the corporate world, Susan has come home to The Valley. You can inquire about hiring TSTC graduates by emailing [susan.holmes@harlingen.tstc.edu](mailto:susan.holmes@harlingen.tstc.edu) or learn about Susan's fiction publications at [www.susanlemiles.com](http://www.susanlemiles.com).*

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# STEPS TO DETECT AND PREVENT SHOPLIFTING

By Eileen Mattei

A woman walks into a store, drops a \$20 necklace into her bag and walks out without paying. Shoplifting is an all too common situation that costs stores nationwide billions in lost inventory.

Regionally, the Weslaco Police Department extended its collaboration with local merchants by providing a three hour workshop on Retailer Shoplifting Prevention. Forty persons, managers and loss prevention leaders at major stores, learned techniques and procedures for deterring, spotting and apprehending shoplifters.

"This is to stop crime from happening," said Weslaco Police Chief Juan Sifuentes, noting the priority is public safety. Within that parameter, he said following certain procedures can help deter shoplifting while other steps make shoplifting investigations and prosecutions more successful.

"We need to find ways to put a stop to shoplifting and to prosecute these people. Because it ain't right," whether they are stealing from a huge chain or small company, said Weslaco Police investigator Alvino Flores, who led the workshop.

The workshop corrected some misunderstandings. Flores said there is no dollar minimum for a shoplifting arrest and prosecution, although the value of the stolen goods determines the classification and punishment for the crime. A habitual shoplifter can be apprehended before he leaves the store with the goods. Video surveillance alone is sufficient to charge a person with shoplifting. Stores do not have to give a Miranda warning before questioning an apprehended shoplifter.

Shoplifting prevention starts with signage (We prosecute shoplifters; We use surveillance cameras), the use of surveillance systems (properly locating cameras to capture faces) or fake systems, mirrors, wise merchandise layout and, most of all, attentive employees, Flores said.

Shoplifters include heavily pregnant women, a family pushing a baby stroller, a senior citizen with a cane and teens as well as thuggish-looking types. Flores listed behavior and appearances that in combination should alert store employees to the possibility of theft. "Look at the total situation. Does it lead you to believe something is not right?" Flores challenged. Coats on when it is hot, diaper bags and no baby, sunglasses and pulled-low caps are some cues. Body language includes whispering, an avoidance of eye

contact, walking too fast, an awkward walk, looking around instead of at merchandise, groups that enter together and split up and bulges in pockets.

## WHAT TO DO?

One small, neighborhood store owner Flores knows puts photos of shoplifters on a Wall of Shame for friends and family to see. Sometimes approaching a suspicious customer and offering to help them can spook them away. But what do you do and say after seeing an item concealed and the thief walk out of store? Large retailers with loss prevention teams react differently than small retailers. Yet any person has a right to prevent theft, Flores said, bringing the person suspected of committing the theft and the stolen property to a peace officer.

"Saying with authority (outside the store), 'I saw you take that. Come with me'" makes most shoplifters

*Letty Espinoza of Wal-Mart networks with Trey Alcantar and Maribel Jacquez of JC Penney. (Mattei)*



comply, Flores said. Don't ask them to accompany you, he emphasized: Tell them. Habitual shoplifters will usually drop the items or run away with them.

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For prosecution purposes, it is best to confront the shoplifter outside, unless he is a repeat offender. “Ideally we would like the customer to be out of store. Is concealment theft? If he is a known offender and has hit your store several times and conceals items or has run,” then, concealment is theft, if you have prior documentation, he said.

Flores advised retailers to study the suspect’s face to be able to identify him or her later in a photo lineup. No heroics, no chasing down someone fleeing the scene. But do try to get a license number, vehicle make, model and color.

A Statement of Offense signed by the culprit can be used in criminal cases and the more details, the more witness affidavits, the better the case is. The prosecutor needs photographs of stolen items and a sales receipt showing the value of the items taken. Video surveillance footage is highly prized. “We’ll help you and sometimes we need your help with video footage,” Flores said.

Chief Sifuentes said retailers don’t have to wait until a crime occurs before calling the police department. “We have a community policing division, and we can be patrolling at a certain time.” A suspected shoplifter may be wanted for theft elsewhere.

“It’s important for us to have communication between stores. They (shoplifters) walk out

and go next door,” said Letty Espinoza, asset protection coordinator at Wal-Mart Weslaco. Shoplifters have told her, “You can’t arrest me. I haven’t walked out the door.” But they are wrong. Intent is a factor. The retailer’s strategy for loss prevention includes having shoplifters be seen in handcuffs.

“There’s a lot of information that can be shared among retailers. Any strategy you guys think of, communicate it,” Flores said. “You have more experience than we do.”



Weslaco Police Investigator Alvino Flores and Chief Juan Sifuentes guided 40 persons through the Shoplifting Prevention workshop. (Mattei)

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# THE ULTIMATE OUTSOURCING BUSINESS: RENTAL WORLD

By Eileen Mattei

Vast best describes the inventory of Rental World. Children's carousels and inflatable wet slides, sparkling white tents filled with tables and chairs for a party of your closest 2,000 friends, industrial generators and crystal chandeliers represent just a fraction of the items Rental World owns and supplies to contractors, homeowners and people throwing parties, fund-raisers and festivals.

In 1980 Richard Wolf bought a small Harlingen rental franchise and the next year opened his independent company Rental World. Initially the company grossed about \$100,000, Wolf recalled. Now Rental World grosses that amount in a week. It was honored as the 2010-2011 Vendor of the Year by the Texas Festivals & Events Association.

"In the last few years, we've gone more and more to supplying parties and events," said Bryan Wolf, a mechanical engineer who brought his expertise to the company his father started. He introduced CAD programming to simplify layout planning for Rental World customers who include local wedding planners and festivals as well as huge events like the Fourth of July Tall Ships party at Ingleside and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Expo in Austin. Event rentals now bring in half of annual revenue, and the balance from contractors and home owners.

Rental World, with locations in Brownsville, Harlingen, McAllen and Weslaco, requires multiple warehouses to store, maintain and manage the thousands of rental items. "We'd rather own and control them. The service and products are too important to leave to anyone else," Bryan Wolf said. That is particularly true for the children's rides, which now require an annual inspection and license from the Texas Department of Insurance. The trackless train, mini Ferris Wheel and Pirates Revenge are among the nearly 200 children's rides and games described in the company's catalog. "We probably have more children's rides available than any other company in the state of Texas," he added, noting a surge in demand and their continuing efforts to give customers what they want. "We are the only licensed and insured temporary rental company for children's rides in the Valley."

Richard Wolf said Bryan's engineering skills have enabled Rental World to take on many jobs that other companies wouldn't attempt. The logistics of setting up and anchoring huge tents—pole tents, tension tents, frame tents and marquee tents with basic units running 10 foot by 10 foot to 60 foot by



Rental World has doubled the number of children's rides it has to meet demand, according to Bryan and Richard Wolf. (Mattei)

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60--are formidable.

In August Rental World was assisting an organization plan for a three-day March event. "One of things we do is have someone go to all the board meetings of a festival," Richard Wolf said. "It's a free service we provide to festivals. We help them lay it out and then we can do CAD renderings they show to sponsors." Using satellite imagery helps Rental World can get everything to scale and demonstrate traffic flow.

Rental World may be the only American business of its kind that has a graphic artist on staff. She produces artwork for events including laying out signage for festivals. Rental World has an in-house sign production department which is kept busy with festival sign production as well as vehicle wraps.

"It comes down to our staff and managers," Bryan Wolf said. The company has 60 full-time employees and another 20 to 30 it calls on as needed. The staff makes sure all parties are operational before leaving. Rental World employees work seven days a week, making deliveries and setting up or tearing down tents and rides once a party or festival has concluded.

Gigantic washing machines at the Harlingen warehouse clean every vinyl tent after each use.

Rows and rows of clean tents are stored here which improves logistical and quality control.

The Wolfs' years of experience mean that many people turn to Rental World for service and advice. They hear questions such as, with 75 people, how big a tent do we need? "We work hand in hand with wedding planners. We can go from the simple up to a million dollar wedding if you want," Richard Wolf said. "We are still waiting for that one." Depending on the party budget, Rental World can supply basic lighting or in new programmable LEDs that bring color the venue..

"It's so important to see what their needs are and their budget. It's no longer Omar the tent maker, and one size fits all," Bryan Wolf concluded.

Rental World, which has long provided the rentals for Corpus Christi's Buccaneer Days and other events



Richard and Bryan Wolf centralized cleaning and storage of their rental tents. (Mattei)

there, is planning to open a store in Corpus Christi in the near future.

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# BIZFEST: STUDENTS TODAY, ENTREPRENEURS TOMORROW

By Eileen Mattei

In a few years, the next generation of Valley entrepreneurs will be in college studying engineering, biochemistry and fashion design. The 33 high school students who participated in the three-day, summer BizFest at UTPA will certainly be among them. The annual Youth Entrepreneurship Competition of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Foundation immersed the teens in a condensed Entrepreneurship 101 course, where they learned the importance of defining the product or service and the market along with business techniques and terminology.

Each of the students at BizFest had a goal: create a business plan for a fictitious company of their choosing. UTPA Professor John Sargent explained the two essential functions of business plan: to attract lenders and investors and to guide the company on a specific course with a defined strategy.

"Think of what's lacking in your community," Sargent challenged them. He instructed future entrepreneurs on the contents of a business plan, which should describe the features of their product or service, list three core benefits it provides and emphasize a tight market niche.

"No matter what field they will go into, this lets kids feel how they can be entrepreneurial," Sargent said. "BizFest gives them a grasp of business and the idea that they can create jobs and make money. You see a real transformation from their first day to the third," when each student presents their business plan in a brief PowerPoint.

Entry to BizFest is limited so every student gets one on one attention. Representatives of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and from UTPA College of Business staff and business students provided guidance and feedback as the teens choose a product and created a business plan.

Roma High School student Rolando Ramos plans to become a civil engineer. "I came because I thought BizFest would show how to establish your own a company and work for yourself." His business plan was to market a showerhead with a built-in timer to institutions such as prisons and to consumers. Ramos got the idea because the issue of overlong showers, he admitted, had come up many times in his house. Wearing a Skills USA T-shirt Jose A Rodriguez Jr, also from Roma High School intends to major in automotive technology at Texas A&M. While working summers at his uncles' factory in Mexico, he was en-

couraged to think about having his own business. "It seems like a good way to go. "I'd like to have my own shop. You're in control."

Last year, competing against BizFest students from Denver, Detroit and Los Angeles, the three Valley competitors swept first, second and third place in the national final. Prizes include scholarships.

"There is so much untapped talent and potential here," said Tammi Redd, UTPA Ph.D. candidate in the College of Business. She

pointed out that most of the BizFest students had never held jobs. "They have so many ideas, and they haven't had the creativity squeezed out of them. They

haven't been told something is impossible so they see a lot more possibilities."

Kathie Hurtado, an Edcouch-Elsa junior who in-



Moses Bravo and Guillermo Gomez are coached by Jennifer Tarzon Director of the US Hispanic Chamber Foundation. (Mattei)

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turned at UTPA's Chemistry Department for the summer, named her company Puri-Water. According to her business plan, the company would distribute packets containing nanoparticles that purify water. BizFest enabled Hurtado to envision her summer research project applied to the marketplace. "Before I went into the internship, I hadn't considered the business side. Now I'm seeing the practical applications of research," she said. The product could be sold in third world countries to create safe water supplies. It could also be marketed as a more eco-friendly process for bottling water and in packets to backcountry hikers.

"It's extremely important you show the judges you understand your business and who you will sell your service to," Sargent advised. Being highly specific about the customers' age, gender, location, income level and occupation, as well as the size of the market is a critical part of a successful business plan

Oscar Paz of Weslaco confidently spoke about going into the graffiti removal business. He'd seen a similar company discussed on the TV show "Shark Tank" and figured he could get into business at a lower cost with used pickup trucks and a workforce

that needed minimal training. His market would be cities wanting to outsource graffiti removal.

The "Shark Tank" also influenced Moses Bravo, who developed an online marketplace where investors and entrepreneurs can meet. The International Baccalaureate student who plans to study architecture said, "I've discovered a lot about myself and what opportunities are out there." BizFest helped him realize that the future is not just about going to college.

The students' proposed products and services ranged from virtual marketplaces and solar panels for school and city busses to eco-showers, a ride exchange, electric scooter rental for tourists and a volleyball camp.

Tami Redd coached future fashion designer Sara Bennack, a Lyford High School junior who already does fashion modeling and clothing designs. "Look for people with the skills and knowledge you don't have," Redd suggested, and learn from local seamstresses and fabric merchants.

"Before I came here I didn't know anything about business. I've learned stuff I had no interest in before. This has been a good experience," Bennack said. Her business plan for Sara Luis Online was



UTPA professor Dr. John Sargent discusses the viability of a business plan with a BizFest participant. (Mattei)

selected as the one with Most Potential. This year, three Valley winners are going to Miami for the national finals in September. Oscar Paz is one of them and will be accompanied by Jesus Gonzalez with his Eco Sunride and Denise Garza and Plaza Play Place.

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# MAJOR EXPANSION AT VBMC BROWNSVILLE

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The new surgical wing of Valley Baptist Medical Center Brownsville (VBMC), a project three years in the making and costing approximately \$10 million, debuted in August. With its four new surgery suites, the renovation of the four existing operating rooms, a new Day Surgery Unit with six private rooms and 14 semi-private rooms, the expansion of pre-operative holding rooms and a new nine-bed post-operative unit, the surgical wing's opening was long awaited by doctors, patients and staff.

"The renovation of surgical services was an absolute priority when I came here in 2005," said VBMC-Brownville CEO Leslie Bingham. The entire surgery area now features state-of-the-art equipment, High Definition (HD) monitors, new anesthesia machines and Steris LED operating room lights that are brighter than conventional operating room lights and generate almost no heat. The new surgical wing is designed for easier, more rapid patient flow between pre-op, surgical suites, post op and the Emergency Department.

"The result is a department designed to meet needs and exceed expectations," Bingham said. The ergonomically designed operating suites have essential equipment suspended from overhead to keep floor space open and to increase mobility. Most suites are dedicated to a specific field of surgery: urology, oph-

thalmology, cardiovascular, orthopedic, neurology. The sterilized instruments and disposable supplies associated with each field are stored adjacent to each suite.

Currently 91 surgeons and physicians have VBMC-B operating room privileges and that includes cardiovascular surgeons, neurosurgeons, orthopedic surgeons, plastic surgeon and ophthalmologists, obstetricians and other specialists. Before the hospital had three pre-op units where it now has seven; the greatly-expanded post-op area will be doing all charting on computers by September.

The construction and renovation project was undertaken by Terry Ray Construction. "This project was one of the most difficult we've taken on," Ray said. "Lord please let us get done," was a frequent prayer. Yet during construction not a single operating day was cancelled.

"This expansion and renovation of our surgery suites benefits the women, men and children of our community," said Bingham. "Valley Baptist is com-

mitted to ensuring that our patients receive the best possible care in state-of-the-art facilities."



*A VBMC-Brownville staffer demonstrates the advanced lighting system in new surgery wing. (courtesy)*



*The new operating suites have equipment on booms overhead, freeing floor space for surgeons, nurses and technicians. (courtesy)*

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# FRONTERA PRODUCE KEEPS THINGS FRESH FROM FIELD TO FORK

By Eileen Mattei

Twenty years ago, when agriculture in the Rio Grande Valley was continuing its decline, Frontera Produce opened for business in Edinburg as a shipper and packer of fresh vegetables and fruit. The move may have been counterintuitive or contrarian but Frontera had the right people in the right place at the right time.

Today Frontera Produce handles 10 million cases of fruits and vegetables — 55 products — annually. Its growing, importing, packing and shipping operations spread from Washington state and Colorado throughout Mexico to Peru and Brazil. The entrepreneurial spirit and experience of founder Jim Steele and his partners enabled the new company to build on good connections with quality, according to Amy Gates, Executive Vice President.

“We were a good company but we didn’t

know how to get to being great,” CEO/President Will Steele said in an earlier interview. He credited Gates, with her background in the agriculture software business, for guiding Frontera onto the road to great by upgrading the company’s operational and technological infrastructure.

Frontera was a good company, Gates said. “What they brought to the table was knowing and understanding the products and good customer service.” The customers, both retailers and consumers, want freshness, quality and reliability.

At the core of the produce business are highly perishable products. “I’m a believer in vertical integration,” said Gates. “It’s critical in many business models, but especially in produce. You’re able to control many steps in the supply chain,” and that helps Frontera mitigate price fluctuations and supply variables. She introduced next generation information

technology to packing, inventory control and shipping of carrots, cabbage, 1015 onions, right on down the list.

Frontera diversified its geographic sources to be able to supply its customers steadily. Currently it contracts for watermelons, for example, from Mexico starting in February, and then gets them in the Valley from its recently acquired Borders Melons, and then moves north in the U.S. for summer and fall harvests.

Owning the land and determining what is planted is the next stage in Frontera’s evolution, Gates explained. “That’s where you are really able to cut costs and control the supply chain.” She modeled Frontera’s structure on successful corporate produce companies she had worked with in California. Gates strived to help Frontera find the balance between its core values and the right corporate structure that would sustain growth, without reliance on any single individual.

“Our philosophy is diversity,” Gates said, both in product and sourcing. The import side has grown, particularly in tropical fruit (pineapples, coconuts, limes), so now forty percent of Frontera’s volume is international.

Frontera has stretched in direct consumer marketing, too so Frontera reaches from the field to the fork, as Gates puts it. And that brings up the crucial traceability factor. “Traceability is an important tool for produce. We have always had it pallet level,” Gates said. But she knew produce distributors needed to do a better job at the case level and four years ago became involved in the industry-led development. Frontera was an early adopter of the case-level traceability technology.



Amy Gates of Frontera Produce (Mattei)

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When cilantro that had been shipped by Frontera was targeted for recall several years ago, the data trail technology on each case pinpointed the suspect farm and fields. Because of that, Frontera recalled only twelve percent of the cilantro it had shipped that week. "In a very bad situation, we saw 'Wow!' This is exactly what we need to be doing, not only our business but the industry as a whole," Gates said. The accurate technology prevented thousands of dollars of cilantro from being dumped.

In 2007 Frontera Produce was experiencing 30 percent annual growth. It dipped to half of that during the recession, but Gates has projected growth over 25 percent for 2011. She attributed that to Frontera's diversified marketing plan of selling more to current customers, utilizing direct consumer marketing and making retailers excited about the Frontera label. The company has diversified into food service and added more growers offshore and domestic.

"We have a multi-tiered approach. Not all of our growth is in one area," Gates said. Diversification is one facet of Frontera's success. If you are diversified and have a catastrophic event, either a hurricane or drought in a growing area or a recall, you still have other crops to sell.

Because of its international and domestic reach, Frontera is considered the Valley's largest produce company. Year round it employs 350 full time and peaks around 600 in the heart of the packing and shipping seasons. Gates sees Frontera as an employer that provides good jobs and attracts smart, dedicated employees. As part of its ongoing community involvement, the company regularly donates thousands of pounds of vegetables to the regional food banks and women's shelters.

"Will Steele told me, 'We are not in the business to make home runs. We want base hits'. Time after time," Gates concluded. "I want Frontera to be the best, not the necessarily the largest."



*Pineapple pallets, with the case level tags attached. (courtesy)*



*At this time of year, Frontera Produce's Edinburg facility does more cross-shipping than packing. (Mattei)*

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# FINDING AND SERVICING CUSTOMERS

by Rick Carrera

Due to limited resources, most small business owners lack marketing plans to promote their businesses. For those who have strategies in place, getting the most return for their advertising dollars is of the utmost importance.

When well-spent, effective advertising can help build clientele, a crucial point for startups and for existing businesses. Conversely, every dollar misspent on ineffective advertising could be better used to reinvest in other areas of the small business.

New businesses should be especially wary of senseless marketing initiatives. A challenge for the majority of small business startups: they often have great products or services as well as excellent locations, however - as with all new businesses - they face the dilemma of finding customers. To help attract clients for any business, a few basic principles should be adhered to:

Know the target market. The first question that a small business owner should ask is: "Who is the target market for our business?" More often than not, a definite answer is not immediately known. But who is most

likely to use your product or service?

Many small business owners have not thought this through. The "general public" is not the right answer. There are segments that should be targeted for each type of business. Here is one way to analyze this issue: out of ten clients who enter the establishment in a given day, how many of those clients are similar in demographic nature (age range, sex, income level, etc.)? Those customers with similar characteristics are part of the segment of the population that is most likely to purchase the business product or service. Taking note of these characteristics will inevitably point the business owner toward finding the correct target market.

Know what a customer would consider important. Visualize customers entering an establishment or utilizing a service. What would they really like to see, experience or buy from the business? To affirm these expectations, the promotion of a business should always include any value-added benefits for customers. Knowing the target market and their wants can help to identify what that market segment perceives as value-added.

Know and be known in a community. One of the best ways to promote a business is to become actively in-

involved in the community. This type of engagement is one of the easier ways to promote a business. A small business actively involved in the community portrays itself as a business that is caring and customer driven, an area where large national retailers usually fail.

Use every available space in the business to promote products or services. Bare walls are a no-no and do nothing to entice the customer to buy products or utilize services. Walls covered with photographs of successfully completed services or of the finest products that a business offers can entice the customer to return again, buy more products or promote the business to accompanying friends and family.

This leads to another point: it is important that all employees be like-minded in terms of sales. Sales and service people should always offer complimentary products or services when closing a sale to make purchases even more worthwhile for customers. Similar to restaurant wait-staff who offer desserts to customers, employees of any type of business should also offer a service or product that accompanies what customers are already purchasing. The mindset of the staff should always be that of increasing sales and customer satisfaction.

Businesses should monitor advertisements. No matter which medium is chosen, business owners should keep track of the impact of their advertisements. For example, owners can ask that customers bring copies of a flyer or coupon to measure how well those particular mediums are working for the business. It is also important to ask for feedback from customers. How did they hear about the business? This is an easy and effective way to find out how well any marketing and promotional efforts are working.

Last but not least, it is essential that business owners stay positive and believe in company products or services. The old adage "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" rings true when it comes to marketing and promotion. Business owners should be ready to sell their products or services at all times. When business owners strongly believe in their businesses, they easily convince their customers to do the same.

*Rick Carrera is a Procurement Specialist with the Rio South Texas Regional Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC). PTAC is a component of the UTPA Business Development & Innovation (BDI) Group and provides technical guidance for business owners who desire to do business with the government. Contact the UTPA BDI Group at (956) 665-7535, for additional information on business counseling and training. Some information contained in this article is based on "10 Smart Promotional Strategies" by Jay Siff in Restaurant Hospitality, June 2005.*

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## IN THE SPOTLIGHT



To encourage women to have mammograms for the early detection of breast cancer, Mission Regional Medical Center administrators and Mission Chamber of Commerce members teamed up at the Mission Pink Luncheon. (photo courtesy MRMC)




On August 10th, community and city supporters and the media welcomed Bert Ogden Harlingen Hyundai with a groundbreaking ceremony at 9021 W. Expressway 83 in Harlingen. Construction is underway of the newest member of the Bert Ogden family of dealerships. (Mattei)

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# MASTER PLAN VS. REAL WORLD IMPLEMENTATION

By Eileen Mattei

Architect Danny Boultinghouse of Boultinghouse Simpson served on the 14-member advisory committee that three years ago crafted McAllen's long-range growth and development plan known as Foresight McAllen. In August, the transition of that master plan into proposed changes to the city building and permitting codes resulted in an uproar from builders, bankers, developers and community activists. Boultinghouse agreed to discuss the process and the reasons for the controversy.

## *What was the Foresight McAllen concept?*

We wanted to define the character of the future city, what it should look like and the direction that growth should take. Foresight McAllen presented a master plan with the goals of helping control urban sprawl by making outlying areas more densely settled, which means more cost-

effective infrastructure and of creating a more exciting, pleasurable, walkable city with more green areas and buffering between diverse uses. The keyword was character: what McAllen would become as it grows.

## *Did the Foresight McAllen advisory committee expect the subsequent implementation of the plan, through new city codes and regulations, to go smoothly?*

We realized that parts of the implementation might not be acceptable, particularly in terms of expense. Our city has prospered with the philosophy that if it is good for business then it is good for everyone. The concern was that some of the quality of life attributes might not be in balance with the investment or even affordable. Some of the models for Foresight McAllen were wealthier communities such as Sugarland and Sharyland Plantation that were developed from the ground up. We tried to customize their

methods to fit our area. The only way to find out if it was a fit was to proceed with the implementation phase. That phase is what is causing concern now.

## *Who drew up the 400 plus-page document that is the proposed development code?*

Over the last 18 months or so, an experienced national planning firm worked with city staff to put together the draft. It was a complete overhaul of existing building and permitting codes and ordinances.

## *What triggered the discontent over the new code?*

Some of the discontent came from the process. There was no evident citizen input in the creation of the new set of ordinances. The development codes appeared to be scheduled for adoption within six weeks of its final draft presentation. We—realtors, developers, bankers, architects, builders, property owners— wanted time to digest this huge document and give our input about possible changes. It was not an attempt to stop the process, but an attempt to get the opportunity to ask questions, understand it and get answers, and to be part of the process.

## *What particular issues are under discussion?*

The new guidelines set up new zoning rules and districts without defining the boundaries of the new zoning districts. The delineation of those districts is yet to come, but it would seem prudent that affected property owners know what restriction might be put on their property rights. Language in the proposed implementation would have prohibited McAllen Affordable Housing from continuing its mission. Utility companies stated they could not comply with some provisions without incurring extraordinary expense. I have a project which we have been working on for months which would not be permissible under the new code although it was acceptable under the previous codes. If the new code was enacted quickly without some sort of transition, that effort would be history. The new code would mandate architectural design standards that “must

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demonstrate a balance between monotony and visual chaos,” “must create meaningful differences in buildings appearance,” terms that are subjective and difficult to define. In some areas, architectural elements are prescribed, such as material types, roof shapes and building footprint configuration, etc.

**What is the best part of the new development code?**

Its accessibility and organization. It is on the city website. Enter the keyword ‘parking’ and it will list all the regulations that effect parking. If it works, this may make the process of getting building permits, subdivision approval and the like more efficient and less time consuming. The plan also gives staff more control and flexibility. And in defense of not having public involvement at this time, there is an online option that offers the opportunity to give public input.

**What do you think are the next steps?**

First, give people time to understand the plan and have their input considered. Open communications. Then resolve those points that have become stumbling blocks, such as the design and architectural guidelines, which are subjective and hard to enforce. Title insurance companies have pointed to rules that might make it difficult to issue title insurance. The most important thing after those issues are resolved is establishing a transition period to let everyone adjust to the changes.

**Are there some big picture concerns?**

The city’s revenue sources rely heavily on sales and property taxes. The potential added expense of ‘quality over quantity’ development may cause new businesses and land developers to look elsewhere. That, along with present slow economy, might cause one to question whether this is the right time to make major adjustments to the development process. Long term, I am convinced that it will pay dividends, but....

**What has been overlooked by the public?**

First, that the new regulations will only affect new development. Second, the code changes-- with responsible revisions—I think will make McAllen a more livable and more desirable community in the future.

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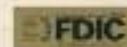


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