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Over the last 10+ years, more than what you drive has experienced a major transformation. Go Green has certainly taken the world by storm; so has how we get our news. It wasn't that terribly long ago I heard my Dad say, "Son, get up and go change the channel." My hair is of a different shade from that era and I recall a four-channel Zenith with the remote being me or one of my three sisters. Since I was the only boy in the household, almost 100% of the time, the remote was little kid brother. Up from the floor (because my sisters didn't allow me to sit on the sofa with them) to turn the dial to one of four networks: CBS, NBC, PBS, or ABC. At midnight, the National Anthem played and that was it. Yep, you chuckle, because you recollect. After 12 a.m., there was no television. No infomercials, no reruns, nothing. Only static until 5 or 6 a.m.

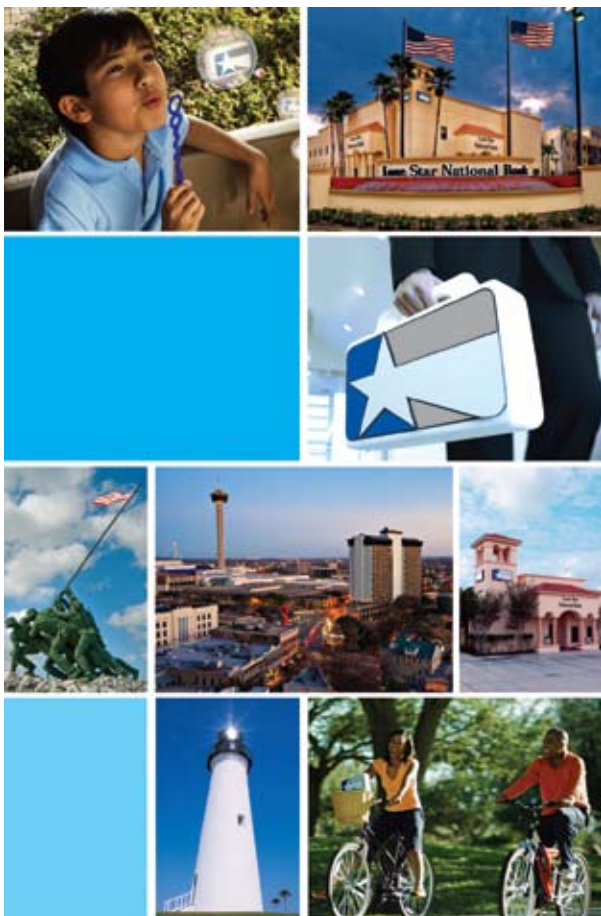
Nowadays, a zillion channels flood our eyes and ears on a 24/7 basis. We are bombarded by media, and at times it's quite overwhelming. We have to be careful to avoid information

overload, while balancing staying connected to news, entertainment and each other. Wow! Things have changed and in the blink of an eye. It was only yesterday's yesterday when we only had landlines, CBs, two handfuls of radio stations and one of TV networks. Then, Hybridville took over.

Keep these things in mind when you as a business leader are making 2013 decisions to market your company, organization or entity to potential clients. The choices are many, so be selective. Unless you have an unlimited marketing budget, fill fewer glasses with sufficient water until thirsts are quenched. Let us know if you have multimedia marketing questions. After all, a hybrid approach to advertising can be a very smart investment.

Todd Breland
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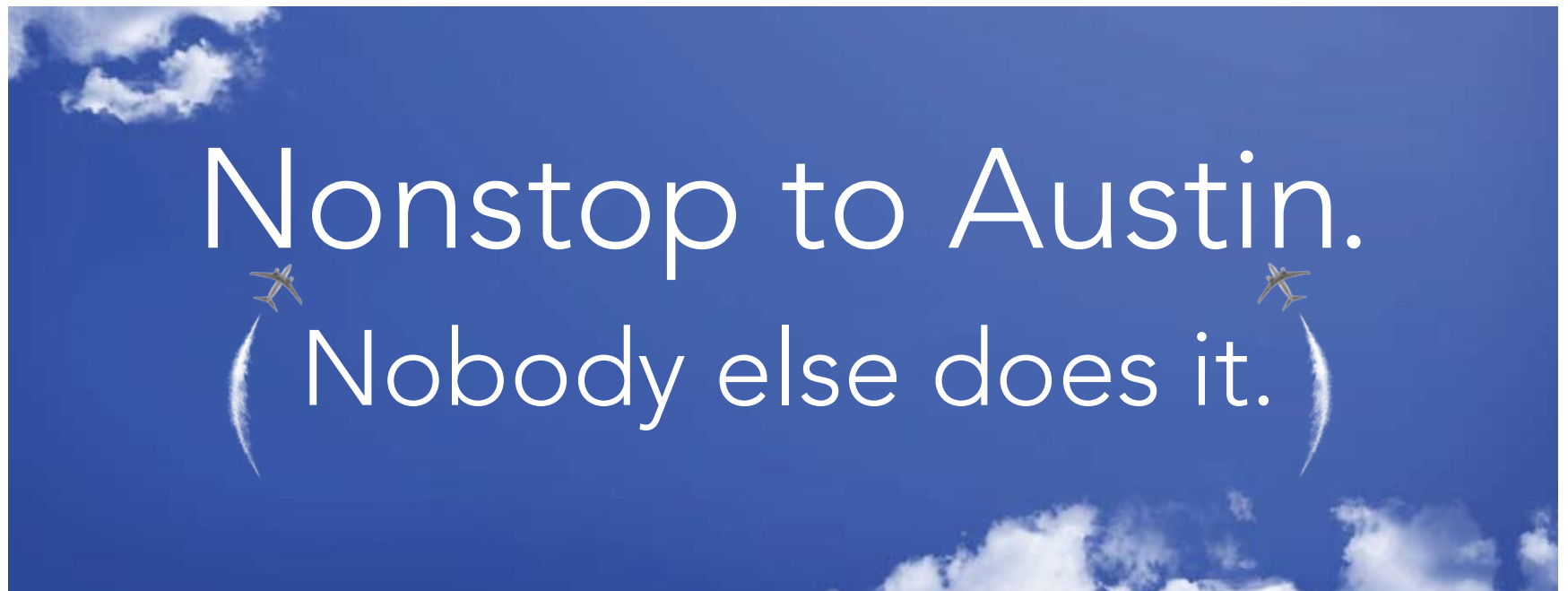
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Letters to the Editor: 300 words or less. E-mailed: editorial@valleybusinessreport.com
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Food to Come Home For

By Eileen Mattei

Our strongest holiday memories of home and family tend to center on food--the whole family, from infants and great grandparents to distant cousins, gathered at the table on Christmas. The special foods prepared for the holidays still evoke the happy gatherings, bygone days and an era when the pace of life was slower. Yet traditional holiday foods are shifting with the times, too.

Singlehandedly, Delia Lubin of Delia's has changed the Valley's perspective on tamales. A generation ago, tamales were a beloved holiday and party food, but Lubin transformed tamales into a year-round food. Now Lubin and her three daughters, Sofia, Laura and Lorena, operate the remarkably successful Delia's tamale stores/restaurants. Every day they sell 18 types of tamales at their five dine-in and drive-through Hidalgo County locations: Pharr, Edinburg, McAllen and San Juan. A new store opens in McAllen this month.

That's in stark contrast to the early 1980s when Delia Lubin returned to the Valley from Chicago. She couldn't find a decent job but didn't want to raise her children on government assistance, explained her oldest daughter Sofia Lubin. "She felt that wouldn't be setting the right example for her kids, so she decided to make and sell tamales. She bought five pounds of masa, sold her first tamales and had a profit of \$10. So she bought more ingredients and made more tamales. My mother had a daily route - going door-to-door."

Little by little, the business grew, and Lubin's daughters helped her, by chopping garlic or helping her sell door-to-door as sixth graders. "Mom was the one who put it all together. She realized

I was a more of a people-person and sold a lot more than she did," said Sofia Lubin. Tamale aficionados at doctors' and lawyers' office kept buying more and more, and the Lubins began providing tamales to locations in Edinburg and Pharr while other customers came to the Lubins' house.

When Ninfa's restaurant in Houston contracted with Lubin to supply tamales, the tamale maker rented a McAllen building for production, opening her first store in south McAllen in 1998. Delia Lubin hired friends and compatible neighbors to work as tamale makers.



Delia Lubin, working with her daughters Sofia, Lorena and Laura, has convinced Valley residents to eat tamales every day, not just on holidays, with her namesake stores, Delia's, stocked with 18 different types of tamales. (VBR)



Veracruz tamales wrapped in a banana leaf are becoming more popular. (George Cantu)

Fresh tamales made at Delia's are ordered online and shipped worldwide to people longing for a taste of home. (Courtesy)



Then she added a few tables, and people would pick up tamales and stay for a tamale lunch. The sisters grew up and got married. About 12 years ago, they came back to work for their mother as the business started booming.

Today Delia's commissary (where all the tamales are made) and corporate office are located in San Juan, which also handles the online orders. In less than five years, the company has outgrown that facility and will be adding 10,000 square feet there in 2013. "We make everything fresh. Nothing is made in advance. We want only to get better," said Delia Lubin, who checks the production process every day. During busy spells, she will sometimes man the cash register. But most of the time, Delia and Sofia Lubin are busy overseeing company operations while Laura focuses on the computer and financial side and Lorena, the youngest, fills in as needed. Delia Lubin is the visible matriarch, but each takes on whatever jobs needs to be done.

"We have taken tamales and made them accessible and an everyday op-

tion for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Everybody has changed the way they think about tamales," said Sofia Lubin. "We try to do the best and always use quality products and not cut the corners. My mom is everywhere." Each store steams the fresh tamales on site.

Delia's started with the standard pork, chicken, beef, and beans tamales. Slowly, new combinations were added, usually to great applause. The chicken in green sauce and spicy pork tamales have become menu mainstays. "We try new ones, but that doesn't mean they will be permanent," she pointed out. A sweet corn tamale found an audience but the salty corn one didn't. "We just added number 18 which is chicken, cream cheese and green sauce. My sister and I were sitting at her house and came up with the idea."

Last December, deliastamales.com went live, although the company had always shipped tamales around the world via FedEx for customers who called in their orders. "Everybody who can't come

home wants tamales," Lubin said. "In December the volume at least triples. Our online orders are growing like crazy." In November and December, the business adds 50 temporary employees to its normal workforce of 80 and

production extends to second and third shifts.

"Everybody who can't come home wants tamales."

--Sofia Lubin

Oven Fresh

'Nothing says loving like something from the oven' was a popular commercial years ago. Valley bakeries knew that jingle spoke the truth,

which was reflected in spike in sales that comes at Christmas time. Whether it's Cory's Cakes in San Juan, Linda's Cakes in Brownsville, or Lara's in Harlingen, bakeries and panaderia are the go-to place for cinnamon-rich pan de polvo, sweet breads and other treats that bring big smiles during the holidays.

At La Especial Bakery in San Benito, siblings Miguel, Moses and Marta Ornelas work with their father, Enrique Jr., in the shop founded by their grandfather Enrique Sr. in 1941. Enrique Ornelas Jr. took over La Especial in 1981, and for a man who has been taste-testing baked goods all his life, he looks quite fit.

The smell of fresh breads and cookies fill the air, and carefully arranged trays of em-

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(George Cantu)

Miguel Ornelas offers a peek inside the huge, 1941 brick-lined oven which is still in use at La Especial Bakery in San Benito. (VBR)



cookies and pan de polvo are big sellers, but keeping up with the tamale orders pushes the downtown bakery into extended shifts. This year Ornelas said they are going to try to get a little ahead, preparing the dough and freezing it until needed. The old bakery has adapted to other demands and now cooks whole turkeys as well.

Tucked behind the panaderia's wide glass display counters is their kitchen with an unexpected link to the past. La Especial has a huge, domed-top brick oven which now is used to cook 50 turkeys at once! The brick oven, fired today by natural gas instead of wood, is still loaded by means of 10 foot long wooden paddles. Twin, ceiling-tall stainless ovens with slowly rotating shelves are the bakery's workhorses

panadas, pan de semita, cookies and sweet rolls catch the eye like a magnet.

"People going out of town take our cookies, breads and tamales with them. They been told 'Don't show up without them,'" said Miguel Ornelas, who grew up in the business with his brother and sister. "Starting at Thanksgiving, you see long lines here. There's a lot of traffic during the holidays." Glazed sugar

for breads and cookie baking nowadays.

Yet the history of La Especial and the bakery's unusual oven don't matter to the children who flood into the bakery each day when school lets out. Just like their parents and grandparents, they smile as they bite into their fresh-from-the-oven cookies at Christmas and any day they are fortunate to make the trip to La Especial.



Enrique Ornelas Jr., whose father founded La Especial Bakery in 1941, continues to help customers take home fresh-baked cookies, breads and cakes. (VBR)

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Tips for Marketing to Winter Texans

By Kristi Collier

Marketing to Winter Texans isn't rocket science, but I have found that some businesses do not find it easy. Here are a few pointers to help you not only attract them, but keep them coming back. Customer service is the number one thing that can make or break your business. This is especially true when it comes to dealing with a 55-plus age market. Include not only Winter Texans, but our Converted Texans and other seniors and retirees in your marketing outreach.

Not all Winter Texans are cheap. Don't judge this market just because they come flocking to you with a coupon in hand. If they have a coupon, most of the time that means they are willing to take a chance on your business. It's the coupon's job to get them to you. It's your job to make sure that they keep coming back. If you treat them like they are second-class citizens when they have a coupon, the odds of their returning are slim to none. And they will tell all of their friends.

Make them feel special. Put "Welcome Home

Winter Texans" on your marquee, have an early bird special, a Winter Texan discount (even as little as free coffee with a meal), have a Winter Texan of the Week program, or just go out of your way to acknowledge them. Especially if they are repeat customers, remembering them or what they purchased is like gold. It's the little things that go the extra mile with this group. If you can succeed at making them feel special, sure enough they will recommend your business to their friends.

Know the lingo. Calling a Winter Texan a Snowbird is blasphemy! Everyone should know, including your staff, that Snowbirds go to Florida. Our retirees are proud to be called Winter Texans, so be sure to get it right.

Speak their language. The number one complaint I hear from our winter visitors about Rio Grande Valley businesses is that employees speak Spanish to co-workers in front of them. They may be talking about what they did last night, what they had for breakfast or what their kids have been up to, but the bottom-line is that our Winter Texan friends don't understand the language and often think that they are the topic of conversation. Avoid creating this discourteous situ-

ation by including them in the conversation. Tell them what certain words mean so they know the topic or let them know Spanish words for relevant things. While they may not try to



Kristi Collier. (VBR)

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learn the language, they like being included.

Home State Pride. Winter Texans are proud of their home state. Just ask them! Take advantage of that fact during sporting event seasons. Offering some recognition to anyone with a Wisconsin ID on game day might surprise you. If possible, offering items that they can only get “back home” will endear your business to them.

Target large groups. We all know that our Winter Texan friends travel in packs. Let them know you can accommodate large groups. Offer a discount or free meal to the group coordinator. I’m no restaurateur, but who wouldn’t love a large group of 20-plus for dinner at 4 p.m.?

Give them something to talk about. After years of studying retirees, especially Winter Texans, we’ve found that the number one source of business comes from referrals. You know, the proverbial word-of-mouth. So, give them something to talk about and you could double your sales. Remember, you only have to exceed their expectations by a little bit in order to get them talking. In other words, it does not have to be anything big or expensive.

Throw traditional thinking out of the window. Have fun with your campaign. Winter Texans come to the Valley for a variety of reasons (i.e. the sun, Mexico, shopping and the dining), but overall they want to enjoy life to the fullest. If you can help them have fun, they will remember you. Get creative with your marketing strategies. Create new activities for this market and enjoy doing it. Fun activities that they can do as a group, along with events that help them learn about the area, language or culture can work wonders.

Again, this is not rocket science, and it doesn’t just apply to Winter Texans. You can direct these techniques to other markets as well. Whatever your marketing budget is between \$100 and \$100,000, remember this market is strong. Winter Texans are influencers in their respected community. Devote time and energy to them and keep these proven marketing techniques in mind.

Kristi Collier is a McAllen native and owner of Welcome Home, Rio Grande Valley, a network for marketing to retirees in the Rio Grande Valley. She can be reached at 956-687-5115 or kristi@welcomehomegv.com.



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Persevering Despite Obstacles

By Eileen Mattei

Picture a tropical golf course, its well-maintained fairways and greens lined with old growth mesquite, oaks and palms; privately-operated and open to the public with very affordable fees, top-notch security and a new club house, all set on historically significant property along the Rio Grande. Then place it on the south side of the border wall in no-man's land, and you have the Fort Brown Memorial Golf Course.

In 1987, Bob Lucio signed a long-term property lease with the City of Brownsville (and later with Texas Southmost College) and became the owner and golf pro of the golf club whose 18-hole course had been abandoned for several years. Built in 1956, the Fort Brown course had provided a home for the Pan Ameri-

can Golf Association comprised of Hispanic golfers who could not gain admittance to existing clubs of that era. Lucio himself learned to play golf as a seven-year-old on the Fort Brown course, while his older brother caddied.

In 2005, Lucio, with his wife and son as business partners, invested in a new clubhouse. "I wanted to jump off that cliff one more time. My wife was supportive and said 'go for it,'" he explained. He financed new irrigation infrastructure and new turf on the greens.

--Bob Lucio

Then the border wall began going up. The Fort Brown Golf Course was sequestered on the south side of the fence. A legal gap in the fence funnels golfers right to the clubhouse and its 165 acres hugging the Rio Grande adjacent to the University of Texas at Brownville.

"If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have done it, the improvements,"

Lucio said. "In a small business like this, your profit margin is small, but we were making a living. It became nightmarish when the fence was built; it became increasingly hard for us.

"We may be making a comeback with people getting used to the border wall. The course is in great shape, beautiful."



Bob Lucio's Fort Brown Memorial Golf Course includes a cannon used on the site during the Mexican American War in 1846. (VBR)

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The border fence brought the perception of danger.” Within a year of the fence going up, golf club membership had gone down by 40 percent. “I had to lay off super-good employees that we’d had for years.”

“It didn’t use to be this way,” Lucio recalled. “The best years we ever had were between 2002 and 2004. This used to be the most beautiful part of a border city. It was the best land on the river.”

Once people perceived south of the border fence as being dangerous, they turned their backs on the golf course. “That is what has hurt our business: the perception that it is dangerous here. But we have the best security of any golf course anywhere. We have a Border Patrol presence everywhere; they respond in 30 to 40 seconds.”

Last winter the decline in players leveled off, Lucio said. “Meaning that we did a little better than the year before. We may be making a comeback with people getting used to the border wall. I’m hearing that the RV parks are going to be full. We do 65 percent of our business in five months, so Winter Texans are an important part of this business. The course is in great shape, beautiful.”

Beneath cottonwoods and Australian pine, visitors discover that the driving range ends at a levee and the remnants of the earthen walls of the first Fort Brown, circa 1846. The Army post and city were named after Major Jacob Brown who was mortally wounded here by shelling from Matamoros. Pointing skyward, a cannon from the old fort marks a battle scene.

The golf course’s strategic location means that Lucio has to deal with more federal agencies than you could swing a club at. The list includes the International Boundary and Waters Commission, because the golf course is in the flood plain. US Fish & Wildlife has a say because the course is in the wildlife corridor



Smooth greens and fairways lined with old, tall trees are givens on this course. (VBR)

along the river. Historical commissions are involved because of the Fort Brown site, and of course, day and night - Homeland Security.

“I’m a big supporter of Border Patrol Agents,” Lucio said. “They do a really good job. They are our neighbors and are here to help us. They have become more receptive to the fact that there are people here golfing,” legally. Lucio jokes that if you hit a ball into the rough, you’re liable to bean a Border Patrol Agent, as well as spot an agent on horseback or ATV moving along the paths. Plus, if your shot goes wild on the wild on the 16th hole, the ball could land in Mexico.

The irony of struggling to pay back a federal loan that helped him upgrade his business in 2005 while another federal agency has placed his business in a no-man’s land is not lost on Lucio. His is a one-of-a-kind situation. No other private golf course along the entire border has been compromised and squeezed by circumstances like his.

But golfers are a single-minded group. They still come to use the driving range and putting green.

The water hazards at the Fort Brown golf Course come complete with wildlife. (VBR)



They drive, chip and putt on the course which is one of the best values in the region.

Looking to the future, Lucio has the only Valley chapter of the First Tee program with 200 junior golfers enrolled. “It introduces kids of all backgrounds to the game,” he said. “They don’t have to have money. We can get them a sponsor.” He’s building a chip and putt course for junior golfers, after seeing the next generation having no problems with the border wall...while their elders slowly adapt to it.

For more information, see fortbrown-golf.com or call 541-0394.

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Traveling for a Living

By Eileen Mattei

As Karen Abbott prepared to board the “Disney Magic” in Galveston, she had no interest in the cruise ship’s destination. “I look at the

food, the cabins and amenities on the ship, not the destination,” said the owner of World Connections Travel, a Harlingen company established in 1982.

After years of working for the full service travel agency, Abbott purchased World Connections 13 years ago. And then came 9/11. Although numerous people advised her to close down the business, Abbott resisted. “My employees were concerned, but I said as long as we can pay salary and utilities we were staying. I knew people were not going to stop traveling,” Abbott explained. “I felt it would happen because people get cabin fever. And the business came back within 12 months. People were ready to make up for lost time and begin traveling again. We have grown every year since.”

In contrast, five other local travel agencies closed down, in part, Abbott said, because of their reliance on the 10 percent commissions then common with airlines reservations.

“That was not an issue with us. Everyone at World Connections is salaried,” Abbott said. “We don’t work on commissions and never have. That way people are free to use the agent they want.” Cruises and tours continue to pay travel agencies commissions for the trips they book, which keeps a portion of the travel dollar in the Valley, a factor to consider, Abbott pointed out. The agency also charges a fee for booking international flights based on the amount of time spent on arrangements.

Still with internet booking so simple, what does World Connections offer that lets them survive and thrive in a competitive market? Go back to Abbott’s research on the Disney Magic cruise. She determines if a cruise emphasizes quantity of food or fine dining, families or adults. She researches how close a cabin is to an elevator shaft or a late-hours nightclub. “You have to really put people in the right place for them,” she said. That attitude applies on land as well: does the traveler prefer



Running a business keeps Karen Abbott in the Valley, advising clients and booking tours for them. (VBR)

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to walk through vineyards and villages or to go shopping? Abbott mentioned a couple who came in to book a cruise they found online. She discovered for an additional \$38 per person, they could receive a significant upgrade. Also, the travel agents remind travelers their passports must not expire within six months of their trip or else they will be refused entrance to some foreign countries.

Abbott is aware that people save all year for their vacations, a fact which drives her company to make sure their clients have a great experience. "We're not here for the money. We want to do the best for them, as if we were finding trips for ourselves. We know so much about geography, politics, what's safe and not safe," she said. "We do get to live vicariously." But she and her staff also take frequent exploratory trips, which fall in the category of "it's a tough job but someone has to do it."

World Connections' loyal clients are young and older, local residents and Winter Texans, some adventurous and others conservative in their travel goals. Many travelers want a full printout of their itinerary and can spend 2.5 hours going over details of their trip with a World Connections specialist. Andy Ferrero's forte is cruises; Susan Stapleton handles Europe, wine country and higher end clients;

Delia Trevino works with Spanish speakers; Carolyn Reininger handles groups, a major market which can involve complicated arrangements. "We want everything as perfect as we can get it," said Abbott who specializes in Disney.

Even for her own trips, Abbott reviews the details with an employee. "Two heads are better than one to make sure everything is right. And I wouldn't go anywhere without travel insurance even Canada or Mexico." World Connections sells travel insurance for trips booked through them or elsewhere. It has helped clients return from Europe in an emergency and helped other get their claims paid when a typhoon disrupted their trip.

This year Abbott has taken trips to Denmark and the Mediterranean and a fjord cruise. The cruise ship, Abbott discovered, was among those that have dropped their standards to the point where Abbott knows her clients would not enjoy the voyage. "I was not happy, and I need to make clients aware of that."

Next year, Abbott will be visiting Tahiti, returning to Australia and new Zealand, and also going

back to one of her favorite destinations, Copenhagen, and then onto Russia. For someone who loves to travel, Karen Abbott obviously has placed herself in the perfect business. "I'm very fortunate."

For more information, call 956-423-1836.



World Connections owner and traveler Karen Abbott visited the Vatican Museum. (courtesy)

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Trophies to Keep from Kingfisher Gallery

By Pat McGrath Avery

Mix art, science and business with creative thinking and you're in an artistic world inhabited by Sandy Margret. The taxidermist, who has an I-can't-wait-to-get-to-work outlook, tackles the prize fish brought to her Kingfisher Gallery studio at the Sea Ranch Marina on South Padre Island.

"If you can use your creativity to fill a need and you're willing to take a risk, then you can achieve success. An artist must also become

engaged with customers, be interested and genuine in providing the right artwork for them. Don't say no to new opportunities," she advised. "It takes strength to say yes." She believes an artist needs a business focus to avoid the "starving artist" life.

"Your art must fulfill a purpose other than pure decoration. Identify what people need and provide them with a purpose so they can justify their purchases," she added. "It requires thinking outside the box to give your audience a reason to buy.

Taxidermy traces its history back to the days of the hunter-gatherers who preserved animal skins for shelter and clothing. Over the centuries preservation methods improved but it was not until the early 20th century that artists gave birth to modern taxidermy. Today it is rightly considered a wildlife art form.

Sandy Margret specializes in fish, which requires an intimate knowledge of science and great skill because the artist must recreate not only the anatomy of the fish but all of the colors in its skin or scales. Sandy Margret employs three different techniques to preserve a memorable catch: skin mount, replica mount

and fish prints.

The traditional skin-mount remains popular even though the fish's meat is rendered inedible. The fish is gutted and dried before she stretches its skin over a Styrofoam mold. Because the fish loses its color as it dries, the artist must then highlight the scales or skin with the fish's actual colors. Replica mounting began in the mid-1970s, but received a cool welcome because the fish were plastic. Today with fiberglass molds, the fish are much more life-like. If a fisherman chooses the replica mount, the fish meat can be consumed. It also allows for catch and release.

Gyotaku is a Japanese trophy fish print reproduction art form in which the fish's beauty is captured while keeping the meat edible. It originated nearly 1,000 years ago when fisherman wanted to prove the size of their catch. Sandy Margret inks the fish with a proprietary non-toxic, water-soluble ink, lays it on an Egyptian linen fabric or rice cloth, and rubs it to provide a detailed imprint. After the fabric is separated from the fish, she uses a fine brush to highlight the detail and create the natural color. Each finished print is unique and captures the fish's beauty as well as its imperfections. She personalizes with location and date of catch upon request.

"People take pride in the fish they catch," she said. "I'm always busy. Each mount or print takes time but customers understand. It's typical for each fish to take at

least six months from start to finish. The fish must hang in a cold room until it is completely dry before any work can begin." She added that trying to shorten the process results in paint and finish that don't last.

Sandy Margret loves the creative aspect of her work. She earned a BA in Art with a minor in Biology from Rutgers University and an MFA from New York University. She moved to San Francisco to begin her career. "After an earthquake, I moved back to New York where I taught at LaGuardia High School. A couple of years later, a blizzard made Texas look like a great place to live."

After several years of teaching in San Antonio and Los Fresnos, she attended taxidermy school and began her new career. Three years ago, she opened her part-time taxidermy shop and two years later, took the full-time plunge with Kingfisher Gallery.

Sandy Margret has expanded her business by showcasing the work of other artists and crafters. In addition to her working studio, Kingfisher Gallery is filled with original works of art to provide homeowners with one-of-a-kind art objects.

"I generate my business mainly by location and word-of-mouth, probably 70 percent," she said. "Another 20 percent comes from developing an ongoing presence at community events such as fishing tournaments and a willingness to be open with the media. The last 10 percent is through paid advertising targeted toward specific events."

The Kingfisher Gallery is a dream destination for capturing that special fishing memory or finding a distinctive piece that you'll never find in anyone else's home. Visit the website at www.kingfishergallery.com or contact Sandy Margret at 956.639.2785 Monday through Saturday.



Sandy Margaret demonstrates how a taxidermist mounts a fish skin. (VBR)



The finished product is ready to leave the Kingfisher Gallery. (VBR)



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Do You Know the Value of Your Business?

By UTPA Small Business Development Center

There are many reasons you may want to know the value of your business. Perhaps you need to know this information for tax or loan purposes, for estate planning, for a merger proposition, or to sell the business and retire.

Whatever the reason, there are numerous valuations methods to consider, ranging from the simple "rule of thumb" technique to more complex ratios that include asset valuation, industry average valuations, and discounted cash flow. Studying these with your trusted accountant will allow you to make better informed decisions about your small business.

"Rule of Thumb" Valuation. The "Rule of Thumb" Valuation involves utilizing a multiplier to determine the value of a business based upon cash flow and profitability. The base multiplier is often called Earnings Before Interest and Taxes (EBIT). Earnings in this sense translate into profits and not gross income. Typical EBIT multipliers are three, four, or five. Why three to five? Because a business is expected to earn back an investment within three to five years. An alternative to EBIT is discretionary cash flow which takes into account

the fact that most small businesses calculate income in such a way that income taxes are minimized.

Asset Valuation. Asset Valuation is based on determining the value of tangible assets and is often used for asset-driven businesses such as retail stores, manufacturing companies, wholesalers, etc. This method calls for determining the fair market value of fixed assets and equipment (cost to purchase comparable assets at current prices) and inventory (based on wholesale value). Asset valuation is then added to discretionary cash flow to determine the value of the business.

Industry Average Valuation. This method uses valuations of comparable types and sizes of businesses that have sold within the last 12 months. At best, an industry average valuation produces a ballpark figure that may be used as a starting point for estimating the value. Variations that would affect this valuation include variation in location, quality of assets, customer base, length of time in business, barriers to entry, goodwill, etc.

Discounted Cash Flow. This method is based on the principal that a dollar received today is worth more than one received in the future. This method estimates the value of a business by analyzing future cash flows and discounting them based on a

weighted-average cost of capital to determine current value.

It is worth noting that a valuation of a small business has many variables and is never an exact science. Some tangible assets increase in value, such as buildings, land, and equipment, but even these are subject to debate based on appraised value and remaining life expectancy. Additionally, other assets are extremely subjective in value, such as goodwill, customer base, barriers to entry, etc. It is similarly important to keep in mind the "art" side of valuation, which involves both compromise and negotiation to complement the science of valuation.

Altogether, a well-developed appraisal can provide significant insight into the worth of the business and serve as guidance when making key decisions affecting the future of your enterprise.

The UTPA SBDC is component of the Business Development & Innovation (BDI) Group at The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) in Edinburg. For further information on BDI Group service for small businesses, please call (956) 665-7535 or visit www.utpa.edu/bdigroup



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Serene, Pampered Clients are the Product

By Eileen Mattei

When Angela Arambula opened Serenity Springs Day Spa & Hair Design in 1996, she had to explain to potential customers what a day spa was. Now her day spa with its menu of pampering services has become so popular, Arambula has plans to build an upgraded Se-

renity Springs Spa.

Clients do become addicted to spa services, Arambula admitted, although she herself is addicted to the positive response of happy clients. "When I see the look on their faces after they have services like a facial or massage, it's wonderful. They looked relaxed and pampered. There is no greater feeling for me."

At 18, Angie Arambula graduated from Hanna High School in Brownville with a cosmetology license. Moving to Houston, she worked as a hair stylist while she earned a business degree. Years later, back in Brownville, she rented space in a salon as a hair stylist and eventually took over the facility.

"I wanted to start a place where I could have all the services under one roof. Little by little, I started hiring people," said Arambula, who now has 11 massage therapists, estheticians and cosmetologists specializing in body services working with her. "What has helped me tremendously is that I use Aveda products." Aveda, a brand of organic skin

care and hair care products, is owned by Estee Lauder. "They are big on education and really help people who carry the line. If you come into an Aveda salon anywhere, the standards are the same."

Arambula typically spends six months or more training new hires to the standards held by Serenity Springs and Aveda. "My staff and I completely understand it takes teamwork," she said. At monthly meetings, she discusses making clients feel comfortable and welcome. "We make them feel like a queen or king. We want to create an experience for each person who walks in here. That sets us apart from other salons...because the staff really gets it." In fact, Arambula said her well-trained, long time employees keep the spa running smoothly. "I'm proud of my staff. I can step away and know that everything will be fine."

Serenity Spa doesn't look like a typical hair salon with rows of hair dryers and sinks. "As an owner, I had to make certain decisions about the direction we would go." She chose not to go after the demographic that has a standing appointment for a weekly wash and set. "My vision is different. I've had people, ones who have traveled a lot, come in and say, "Your salon is amazing."

Amid oriental-style rugs, tufted easy chairs, cedar walls, trickling fountains and subtle lighting, Serenity Spa has created an atmosphere described as peaceful, relaxing, smoothing and private. The multi-level facility includes a steam room, facial and massage rooms, and a mani-pedi nook on the mezzanine. There china cups surround the refreshment area and light spa lunches are served.

"This building has been wonderful in the sense that it has helped me to grow my business. It wasn't intended for a spa, but we make do," Arambula pointed out. For her, Serenity Springs Spa is a relocated Cheers, a place where everyone knows your name. "Of course, we have customers who are like family. Some budget to come in; others have been coming in since the beginning."

They come in from McAllen, Harlingen and Houston. Special occasion customers find Serenity Spa for birthday parties, bachelorette parties and spa packages. "I get together with the bride and we plan mani-pedis, massages and facials. We have at times closed the salon for them," she said. "It's so much fun." Serenity has mini-spa packages for children's parties, complete with little girls' terrycloth robes and slippers.

"More people realize that if they take good



Serenity Day Spa's pedicure offer a pampered interlude. (VBR)

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Angie Arambula. (VBR)



care of themselves that means they can care better care of others. Personal services is one of best fields to be in. There is so much potential for growth. The newest thing I find is that men are really beginning to understand the concept of the day spa," Arambula said. "They are taking care of themselves with exercise, and the spa is an extension of being fit and healthy. I'm looking forward to making the spa more friendly for them."

Arambula has traveled around Texas to see other spas and talk with spa owners in preparation for a major change. In February 2013, property she purchased on Serenity Pond will be paid off. Arambula has begun discussions with a local architect and Aveda's designer to create a two-story dream home there for Serenity Springs Spa. "This project is going to be the biggest one of my life," said Arambula, bubbling over with her vision for the future where clients can spend an entire day being pampered. "Brownsville better get ready for a most wonderful spa."

For more information, call 541-0393.

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Get Legal Protection for Your Ideas

By Eileen Mattei

March 2013 brings a monumental change to patent law when the Leahy-Smith Act goes into effect. The U.S. will switch from a First to Invent system to a First Inventor to File basis. The Technology Ventures Conference on Protecting and Commercializing Your Intellectual Assets, sponsored by the UTPA Small Business Development Center and the UTPA Of-

fice of Innovation & Intellectual Property, examined that change, the biggest patent shakeup in 60 years, and commercializing a patent.

Patent attorney David Clark explained that a successful patent must be useful, innovative and non-obvious. He recommended first doing a thorough Google search to see if your idea exists anywhere. If your product, process, design or composition appears unique, the first step is to file for a provisional patent. "It puts a mark in time for you," he said. This gets you on record as the First Inventor to File.

Next step is the nonprovisional, which gets you "applied for" status. "It could be three to five years before the patent is issued."

Clark described several of the most important steps in preparing your technology for its introduction to investors and the marketplace. Start with a detailed description of the problem your new technology solves and do it in simple-to-understand, non-jargon language. The description of the product itself should point out its features and their functions

along with the benefits of those functions. As the management team works through describing the product features and benefits, they should discover their marketing message. You should also have a strategy to protect the intellectual property and be able to articulate what development stage your product has reached.

Investors, Clark said, look at four areas when researching a potential investment: the technology itself; the management team; the market for the product or process; and the financials.

Clark has all his clients read the book "Patents, Copyrights & Trademarks for Dummies." "If the patent is that important to your business, don't do this yourself. See a patent lawyer."

On the issue of discussing your new idea, Clark said don't do it. Before you disclose your idea to independent contractors, you must get them to sign non-disclosure agreement. "If you are showing people your secret sauce, you want to protect it." Nevertheless, he noted that professors presenting papers at conferences are among the biggest transgressors. The upcoming First to File process is going to require even greater caution. Canada switched to a FIF system 25 years ago and reportedly has seen a decrease in independent inventors filing for patents while those filed by large corporations have increased.

Clark pointed out the long-term outlook that inventors and their investors must take. "Most management teams I deal with, no one is getting paid. They are all in it for a piece of the action. They are all risk-takers, No one is looking for a W-2." Potential growth

"The sky is the limit when you are the first to market. People buy things because they are new and will pay exorbitant prices," said engineer Kathy Wiggin, who is director of Manufacturing Operations of FibeRio Technology. "People will steal your idea, because you can name your price when only you have it." That's why patent protection is so crucial.

"Keep in mind that good inventors are not necessarily good business people and vice versa," Wiggin said. She acknowledged that she is not an inventor, but she knows



Henry Oh, Director of TMAC, exchanged information with UTPA chemistry professor Dr. Frank Dean, who is planning to start trials on a diabetes drug. (VBR)

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Jacquelyn Michel, now the Director of Technology Transfer at UTSA and until recently at UTPA, discussed technology commercialization and patents with conference speaker and attorney David Clark. (VBR)



how to help inventors make things their products on a commercial scale. FibeRio is now bringing nanofiber spinning machines to market.

Wiggins listed some steps necessary for the commercialization of a great idea. First of all, various support groups are essential. "You have to ask for help. Go to family and friends for moral support only. Find the experts in your area. Don't be shy," she said, about asking experts to serve on your board of advisors. "Don't surround yourself only with people who think just like you. Know what you don't know." Instead seek persons of different backgrounds who can bring to the table something you don't have.

Multiple paths are open to commercializing new technology. One option is to license the technology. "You have the idea, but you don't do the work" of bringing it to market, Wiggins said. The inventor then decides between upfront payments or royalties. "Everything is negotiable, but the more risk, the more reward." Alternatively inventors can establish partnerships with people with complementary assets, form joint ventures or seek venture capital.

Some inventors choose to start their own company, but then have to decide if they will be the CEO or are more comfortable, more suitable, in the role of technology advisor. "If you are interested at all, go ahead and form a LLC. It's easy," the engineer said. "Create a business plan with milestones." Critical ingredients include facilities, money, networks and alliances. "Better products don't always make the most money," Wiggins reminded her audience.

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Pronto Provides Concierge Service

By Eileen Mattei

After taking early retirement, Linda Wise still felt vital and useful. "I looked around and saw a need and decided to fill it," said the founder of Pronto Errands. The company acts as the rapid-response go-fer or the personal concierge that all busy persons and businesses wish they had.

"The thing in shortest supply is time," Wise said. "We do the little jobs, all the errands that people have to do, but they can't find the time. We started out this year with the idea of providing lots of different services, such as waiting for repairmen or doing grocery shopping for those

who can't get out or registering vehicles. Yet so far, the courier side has grown to be the busiest side of the business."

Pronto Errands appears to have tapped into an underserved market and is already paying its way.

"We have done everything from delivering sonogram equipment to Eagle Pass to delivering subpoenas and valentine baskets. One of our larger jobs was delivering the uniforms for all the Idea schools," Wise said. The company provides services from Brownsville westward and up to Austin.

With the holiday season here, Wise's crew of part-time couriers is available for wrapping and mailing packages, housesitting, picking up dry cleaning, putting flowers on graves and numerous other errands that eat into leisure time. Pronto Errands does not babysit, transport people, clean houses or do yard work.

Wise, 66, knows what she wants in her employees. "I look for active seniors with an emphasis

on disabled vets. Mature workers have a stronger work ethic. I have found they are more dependable, and they approach their responsibilities with a different attitude. They have had a lot of experiences, good and bad, that the younger generation hasn't dealt with." Her couriers are all U.S. citizens, insured and bonded, have had a background check and are subject to drug testing.

--Linda Wise

While Pronto couriers carry identification cards, Wise decided against uniforms and logos on the vehicles. "We dress in conservative business clothes. We don't want to detract from the company we are working with."

Before her first retirement, Wise had owned a jewelry store and a restaurant, managed a large San Francisco employment agency and did statistical analysis with the US Post Office. "My personal motto is 'God didn't put me on this earth for decoration. He put me here to leave things better than I found them and to help people when I can.' I've had a very fortunate life," Wise said. "People have to make their own jobs in this economy. Even if you don't need the money, you can volunteer. There is nothing below your dignity."

Wise is now concentrating on growing her business: Pronto Errands has begun bidding on contracts to supply interoffice communications to businesses with multiple locations. She hopes to add six more part-timers to her staff as Pronto Errands gains name recognition. "We've had referrals from satisfied customers. People are finding us through the internet. My granddaughter (who works in IT) did our website, and it ranks high. Also, there used to be a Valley delivery company called Pronto, and people looking for them have ended up using us."

Wise said Pronto Errands is in business to answer the needs of busy women who have felt they needed a 'wife' of their own to wait for the air conditioner repairman or take the car in for an oil change. It caters to workers who are pressed for time and dream of a private concierge, while it is on call for a business that needs an errand or two run, right away.

For more information, see www.prontoerrands.com or call Linda Wise at 956-630-6464.



Linda Wise. (VBR)

The Bullet Proof Worker

By Susan LeMiles Holmes



“The only constant is change.” Who said that? I thought it was my grandmother! Come to find out, it was Heraclitus of Ephesus around 400 BC. Man, was this guy right. It is no secret that the pace of business change

races faster than we can follow every year.....actually, it seems like every quarter.

Extensive efforts have been made by education and government to cope with the accelerating inevitability of change in the work place. Both entities work hard and spend lots of money to retrain displaced workers as well as workers with obsolete skills; but we are hardly winning the battle. There are well over 3,000,000 job openings in America going unfilled every day because of the skills mismatch in the market.

There has also been a simultaneous trend developing that could assist in keeping pace with constant change, the growing trend of selecting employees, not by an experience match, but by a “transferrable skills” match. The Department of Labor has been analyzing data regarding these vocational evaluators for years and you can find their results and recommendations in detailed fine print on the DOL website.

In short, a “transferrable skill” is a portable skill that can be taken from one job to another, from one industry to another. The concept is a shift away from traditional evaluation of job candidates based on industry experience and tenure.

Skill matching has been discovered by career counselors and candidates themselves because of the growing use of computerized résumé screening and selection through key word searches. Have you noticed that more and more résumés contain a “Key Skills” section at the top of the document? To verify the skill claims, look at the examples of how the candidate used these skills in the body of the job descriptions. This style of résumé writing is being taught in most colleges and vocational schools including TSTC.

In a candidate’s Key Skills list you will

see hard skills like welding, EPA Certified, CAD, Microsoft Word, Quicken or electronic troubleshooting. But, you are often going to see soft skills listed too, such as supervisory skills, presentation skills, promptness, oral and written communications, deadline driven, ability to learn new software, critical thinking skills. These abilities are transferrable skills as well.

I like the skills matching trend for a couple of reasons. Have you ever hired a candidate with the perfect background of experience and education only to find that the person cannot actually do the job? Using a combination of a hard skills match and a soft skills match might give you a better, broader candidate pool and a greater chance of a successful hire. Of course, you may have to negotiate this method with your HR department.

More important is the fact that work is being reinvented, and corporate hiring and staffing models are changing rapidly. How many of your family members and acquaintances work as independent contractors or temporaries? According to staffing industry analyst Dana Shaw, “the average mix of contingents [contractors and temporaries] in the Fortune 100 is 20-30 percent of the workforce, but it will evolve to 50 percent.” She goes on to say this evolution will be complete in barely eight years.

At this moment in time, the Texas Workforce

Commission defines “the bullet proof worker” as a welder with a Commercial Driver’s License, who can use an Excel spreadsheet and pass a drug test. I don’t see a thing about years of experience or specific industry experience. These workers and others with high demand profiles in manufacturing, information technology, allied health and leadership have lots of choices, even with a national unemployment rate of 8%. These workers will have more access to more information about their choices than ever before; and they will be the sought after survivors.

To learn more about how candidates will use not only skills matching in their future job searches, but also how they will use work values matching to make job choices, you might want to look at www.onetcenter.org/tools.html. It’s a whole new world.

Susan LeMiles Holmes is Director of Career Services at Texas State Technical College and a published novelist. You can inquire about hiring TSTC graduates by emailing susan.holmes@harlingen.tstc.edu or learn about Susan’s novel set in The Valley, Touch the Mayan Moon at www.susanlemiles.com.

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Seven Sights to see in the RGV

By Eileen Mattei

During your holiday season free time, you will hear the question, “What are we doing today?” I’ve got some great answers--selected

stops and itineraries that will let you enjoy the Valley and even show it off to your visitors. Some of these are off the beaten path and show sides of the Valley you may never have seen. Other ones, I’ll bet, you haven’t revisited in years. Mostly outside and totally fun, these staycations are each worth taking time to explore.



The Hidalgo Festival of Lights is a month long extravaganza of astounding Christmas decorations and free performances. (Courtesy)

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the marvelous Estudiantina Guadalupana on Dec. 7-10 and Dec. 12-16. For \$4, you can hop on a trolley tour of the Christmas light decorations. For \$10, you get the trolley tour, a supper and a reserved seat at the nightly concert. This year’s theme is Victorian Christmas. Download self-guided driving maps of the lights and get more info at [www. Hidalgofol.com](http://www.Hidalgofol.com)

A four-hour cruise: A Brownsville Ship Channel cruise takes you past the towering marine oil platforms under construction at AmFels, the three shipbreaking companies which open up giant freighters like tin cans, and the shrimp fleet. Add dozens of dolphins, shore birds, the oyster beds of South Bay and the Port of Brownsville’s silos and docks to make a memorable day on the water. Several ships offer four-hour trips from South Padre: Murphy’s Law (761-4752, \$35) and American Diving

(761-2050.)

A Four-star road trip: Start at La Sal del Rey kiosk on Highway 186, four miles east of Texas 281. Walk one mile on the wide gravel path to reach the huge salt lake that shimmers like a snowfield in the winter sun. Your footsteps in the crusty salt fill up immediately with brine. You’ll see wild javelina and lots of wildlife at this tract of the LRGV Wildlife Refuge corridor, and it’s free. (784-7521.) Then head east on 186 to 1425 and turn west and south on 491 until you reach Lee Lane and Hilltop Gardens, the oldest aloe farm in the US. A self-guided tour (\$1) takes you to the sensory, healing and children’s gardens as well as the large and diverse aloe collection. (hilltopgarden.com, 262-2176, closed Sunday.) Retrace your steps on 491 and continue east to Lyford. On the east side of Hwy. 77, pick a road, any road and drive past some of the region’s 600 wind turbines. All will be operational on Jan. 1, 2013.

A downtown get-around: No matter your age, you will be one happy kid wandering the gorgeous grounds of the Gladys Porter Zoo and gawking at the renovated walk-through aviary, the chattering monkeys and the splashing seals. Open daily 9-5. (gpz.org) Nearby, the tiny Costumes of the Americas Museum displays colorful clothing of North and South American Indians and settlers. Brownville’s City Cemetery at Madison and Fifth evokes New Orleans’ burial grounds. Historical markers abound,



The Brownsville Ship Channel cruise gives passengers up-close views of the shipbreaking yards. (VBR)

A fun day trip can take you from the Salt Lakes on Highway 186 to Hilltop Gardens' huge aloe collection to the wind farms of Willacy County. (VBR)



citing victims of yellow fever, cholera, gunshot wounds, along with notable departed residents. The Old City Cemetery Center, with its well-done displays and free guides, is at 600 Jackson and open Tues. to Sat. 10- 4. (541-1167.)

An owl prowls: Bentsen-RGV State Park in Mission, Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco and Resaca de la Palma State Park of Brownsville offer night walks. At Bentsen (584-9156) "Creatures of the Night" are the focus of the Saturday tours from 6 to 8 p.m. Reservations required. Estero's Full Moon Hikes has revealed glow-in-the-dark scorpions and chatty



The Palo Alto Battlefield offers bilingual, self-guided tours where you might spot bobcat tracks crossing the paved path. (VBR)

owls. On Friday night walks at Resaca de la Palma, near Olmito, that loud rustling in the dark woods that gets closer and closer can turn out to be an oblivious armadillo. (350-2920 to RSVP.)

Writing on the wall: Pick up a free mural guide at Harlingen's Downtown office, on the corner of Jackson and Commerce, and take a walking tour of the city's ongoing program. Don't miss the huge tile mosaic titled The History of Mexico and Mankind, Bill Haley and his Comets and the newest commissioned mural. If you have time, visit the Marine Military Academy and the

Iwo Jima Monument (the original from which the Arlington Cemetery memorial was cast.)

March of Time: The Palo Alto National Battlefield's Ranger Walks, held Mon. and Wed. at 9:30 a.m. and Sun at 2 p.m., offer explanations of the battle that occurred here in 1846. Living History programs are December 1 and January 5, 10-1 p.m. (541-2785, ext. 333.)



Living History actors, steeped in the culture and events of a bygone era, bring the Palo Alto Battlefield to life once a month. (VBR)

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A Matter of Safety

By Nydia Tapia-Gonzales

According to the Small Arms Survey, 650 million small arms are currently in civilian hands, and civilian ownership is the fastest growing consumer category of small firearms. The Rio Grande Valley is no stranger to guns



Enrique Escobedo operates American Firing Range & Academy, the only regulation tactical indoor firing range in South Texas. (VBR)

and has seen an increase in their circulation in recent years. But according to Dr. Enrique Escobedo Jr., Director of American Firing Range and Academy in Brownsville, gun-related accidents and deaths in the Valley have declined. Escobedo believes our so-

ciety has become more safety conscious and believes something is being done right.

Prior to becoming the Director of the American Firing Range and Academy in 1999, Escobedo was a professor of environmental health. He recalls the times when his parents would not buy him a BB gun for Christmas. "I finally got a Red Ryder at age 35," Escobedo said, laughing as he recalled his love of the job.

American Firing Range and Academy delivers high-end training services in a professionally staffed state of the art facility. There are six indoor shooting lanes equipped with computerized tactical targets and a large outdoor range with 200 yards of tactical training. The outdoor range is regulation size for range master and safety officer programs. There is no caliber restriction for the outdoor range. Assault rifles are allowed, but clients are expected to follow a very strict safety code at all times. Company-sponsored shooting tournaments have become very popular among the clientele who crowd the firing range every Thursday afternoon.

American Firing Range is the only regulation tactical indoor shooting range in South Texas and promotes a no-hassle concealed handgun license class, CHL. These classes are offered every month at a current cost of \$79. Private groups are welcome. The number of students per class varies, but regardless of the numbers, Escobedo says everybody receives VIP treatment. Escobedo oversees the entire CHL program and the academy's training curriculums.

"Our main focus is safety at all times," said Escobedo. The eleven-hour CHL class, touches on important subjects such as the basic requirements, legal aspects, penal codes plus communicating the process of preventing conflict. Justifications of deadly force, as well as increased emphasis on the levels of awareness are essential training components.

The company has recently focused on meeting the needs of women. "There is still some level of hesitation among women, and we have noticed they feel more comfortable when training with other women," said Escobedo. "We are working on accommodating their needs by increasing shooting activities exclusively for them as we guide and instruct them through the process of becoming legally armed citizens." Acknowledging the negative connotation handguns carry because of the association with death and violence, Escobedo believes that, if used responsibly, guns can help save lives. He also addresses the fear parents have when their teenage children express an interest in guns. Instead of avoiding the topic, and preventing them from learning how to handle a gun safely, Escobedo believes the best option is educa-

tion. It could be the difference between life and death. "I do not focus so much on grades, or whether a student passes or fails, but I do focus on educating a safe handgun owner."

An avid golfer, Escobedo uses a golf metaphor when stressing the importance of commitment to practice. He says that anybody can learn the basics of a good golf swing in less than an hour, but it is only with practice that the swing will be perfected. The same can be applied to the basics of shooting a gun. He recommends practicing often, practicing safely and practicing correctly in order to excel in marksmanship.

The academy offers training programs for security officers and body guards, services Escobedo says are in high demand in the area. The academy is proud of the professionalism, sense of duty and responsibility they instill in their trainees. One of the neatest parts of this training is a simulator which consists of 300 scenarios recreated inside a dark room, in front of a large screen with surround sound. These scenarios are carefully selected by Dr. Escobedo and can be done in English and Spanish. The training enables students to effectively master their reactions to different possible violent scenarios while exercising marksmanship.

The management of American Firing Range and Academy firmly believes in giving back to the community. They recently donated 50 turkeys to the Brownsville Police Department for their annual turkey giveaway benefiting needy families. They also sponsor an annual Safety Fair. The next one is scheduled for the last weekend in April 2013, where they inform the community about gun safety through fun activities, with all the proceeds benefiting a local charity.


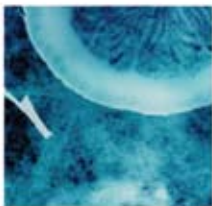
For additional information visit www.americanfiringrange.net or call (956) 542-2285.






The firing range accommodates multiple shooters. (VBR)

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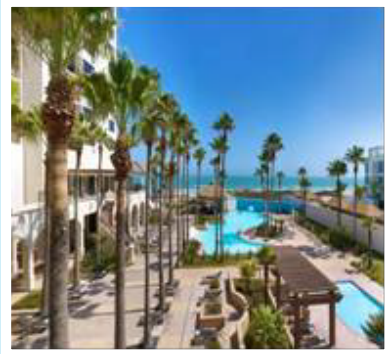
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Businesses Giving Back Peace on Earth

By Eileen Mattei

As kids, our Christmas excitement revolved around the presents we'd be getting. As adults, our focus tends to shift to sharing the holidays with people we love and making the season joyous for all. With maturity, we discover that giving is at least as satisfying as receiving. Spreading the feeling of peace on earth, good will to men is rewarding in so many ways.

This time of year, opportunities abound for you and your business to share the Christmas spirit and help those less fortunate than ourselves. We all have causes near and dear to our hearts. Some businesses earn the gratitude of their employees by offering a matching program that duplicates their gifts. If donations to charities are a normal part of your holiday spirit, funding programs that work to make Christmas magical for children, regardless of their situation, include Salvation Army, Toys for Tots and angel trees at several businesses and banks. If you don't have time to shop for these programs, cash contributions are equally appre-

ciated. Sunny Glen Children's Home in San Benito (412-5356) and Rio Grande Children's Home in Mission (585-4847) always welcome community support, whether Christmas gifts, funding or in-kind. CASA, which advocates for neglected and abused children to shorten their time in foster care, needs volunteers and funding. Reach them in Brownsville at 541-6545 and at 381-0346 for Hidalgo County.

Donations can help fund operations year round at the Valley's Boys & Girls Clubs. For decades, the clubs in McAllen, Harlingen, Brownsville and Pharr have helped children build confidence and competence as well as guiding them to channel their energy to positive activities.

You can volunteer your time at shelters such as Loaves and Fishes, organize a food drive for the Food Bank of the RGV (call 682-8101, ext. 9) and offer your services through church programs which look out for the sick and poverty-stricken of the community.

Men and women in the military, either away from home during the holidays or recovering from their injuries, appreciate your support. Send

your wishes for Merry Christmas with a gift to woundedwarriorproject.org or to the Valley group which sends care packages to soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen under the name americanmilitarysupport.com.

Comfort House, a non-profit home for hospice patients in McAllen, provides palliative care and a hand to hold for the terminally ill. Call 687-7367 to find out how you can help this month. Sunshine Haven (350-8400) offers similar care and comfort in Olmito.

If you want to reach further afield, Heifer International for 68 years has helped families around the world become healthier and more self-sufficient. When a family is given a starter flock of ducks or chicks, some rabbits or bees, or a goat or pig, Heifer stipulates that one of the animal's offspring be passed on to another family. (heifer.org)

Sharing the Christmas spirit will add blessings to your holiday season.

Computer Comfort

By Special to VBR

If your job has you sitting at a desk or computer all day, you're probably beginning to feel the effects. While some may say sitting isn't strenuous at all, there are certainly pains and aches that a lot of us acquire from our daily desk jobs, but you can combat computer fatigue and avoid the aches and strains of your desk job with these useful tips.

Neck Strain: Neck pain, stiffness, tight shoulder pain and tension can all be caused by your relationship with a computer. Combat it by becoming aware of how you're sitting. Your elbows should be at 90-degree angles to your keyboard. If your shoulders are drooped to reach a low keyboard or raised to reach a high desk, that constant tension could be causing your shoulder pain. Look for a keyboard tray or adjust your seat height to achieve 90 degrees. If neck stiffness persists, examine where your screen monitor is. It should be at eye level (or a tad lower) and straight ahead of you. If you're looking at a monitor to the side or constantly tilting your neck up or down to see your screen, those movements add up. Adjust it properly.

Eye Strain: If you look at a computer eight hours a day, you need to take care of your eyes. New research shows that people who sit in front of a computer for as little as two hours per day are at risk for Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS). Avoid that with the 20/20/20 rule. Every 20 minutes, look at

something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. When we're reading or working at a computer, we tend not to blink as often, which can result in dry eyes. Make a conscious effort to blink more often.

Back Aches: A stiff back can ruin anyone's workday, especially if you have a desk job. As more and more people use laptops over desktops, back pain is becoming especially common. Laptops weren't designed for long-term use. Due to their design, people are often hunched over or seated improperly. Make sure that your seat is adjusted properly. You should be seated upright, and your feet should be planted flat on the floor. If they aren't, look into buying a footrest.

Also, be sure that your lumbar is supported. Ergonomic chairs, especially ones made for computer work, have adjustable armrests. You can even opt to sit on a stability ball, which naturally encourages you to sit upright. They're also great for strengthening your abs while you sit and balance, which will help to strengthen your back muscles.

Lastly, get up and stretch your back every hour. A good rule of thumb is to stretch in the opposite direction of your slouch.

Use these tips and you should be more comfortable as you work at your desk.



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Do You Need Full-Time IT Staff or Not?

By Christopher Tagle

At some point, every company talks about cutting cost and wrestles with the idea of IT outsourcing. When outsourcing, a company contracts with specialized service providers to provide specific functions, instead of doing them in-house. Why do it? Outsourcing



saves time, money, additional resources, and it makes good business sense. IT outsourcing is not new, but it's a relatively untried concept in South Texas. In Austin, San Antonio, Houston and Dallas, companies outsource every day and almost everything: payroll services, human resources, website development, mobile app development services and more.

The IT outsourcing model can be applied just as successfully to Valley businesses. Business size is irrelevant when it comes to IT outsourcing. Whether you have two computers or 100 computers, all businesses should have

IT support. Not only does IT outsourcing reduce your payroll costs, it brings specialized experience, knowledge and stability. It eliminates the time and resources wasted as your current staff attempts to fix IT problems.

Having full time IT staff was justifiable back in the days when everyone used the unstable Windows NT, Windows 95 and Windows 98 operating systems. In those days, computers just didn't stay up and running like they were intended. Today computers, networks and remote monitoring capabilities make it practically impossible to justify full time IT staff.

If computers, office networks and servers are setup properly, then 90 percent of IT time is dedicated to maintenance and upkeep, which can be done remotely.

Here are some benefits from outsourcing your IT department.

1. Reduce costs- By outsourcing your IT, you can save in the following areas: salary, insurance, workman's comp, sick pay, vacation pay and taxes per employee.
2. Professionalism and knowledge base- Outsourcing your IT allows your company to lever-

age the wealth of IT expertise of professionals with different backgrounds at no extra cost.

3. Fixed monthly budget- Purchasing your IT hours in monthly blocks or hours saves you money in the long run. Outsourcing insures your IT budget is spent on active IT upkeep.

4. Remote Services work wonders- So you are in Dallas at a meeting and your laptop starts acting weird. How can your in-house tech staff help when you are 512 miles away? With IT outsourcing, you get IT professionals who can login to your laptop and fix the majority of issues remotely.

5. 24/7 Accessibility- What happens when something happens after hours? You have to pay that employee comp time or overtime. With IT outsourcing, you eliminate comp time and overtime.

Christopher Tagle is CEO of TagleRock Technologies, LLC, an IT firm located in Mission with national clients such as Wal-Mart, Dollar General, Lowe's and numerous clients around the RGV. You can visit them online at www.taglerock.com

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Policies Provide Protection

By Michael Pruneda

In last month's article, which is part of the series, "Top Ten Ways to Prevent a Lawsuit," we learned the #3 way to prevent your company from being involved in a lawsuit. Employee training is a tool that promotes consistency, details employee expectations and increases efficiency within the workplace. Improper training of your employees can lead to serious liability and loss of business.

#2 Policy

Rene opened a small restaurant that quickly became the favorite local hole-in-the-wall. Because it was a low-key operation, he did not think it was important to formally adopt policies and procedures aside from the ones he had to post that were provided by the state.

One day, his kitchen staff threw their knives in the sink for washing and piled a stack of plates on top of it. The dishwasher, unknowing of the danger beneath the plates, sliced his hand open and suffered nerve damage. He lost his ability to grasp objects and perform menial functions. He sued Rene for failure to have policies in place detailing proper cleaning

procedures and won. Rene was financially ruined and had to close his business.

Improper policies and procedures, or lacking them entirely, can be detrimental to your business. No matter the size of your business, it is imperative to have them in place to protect yourself and your employees from hazards, miscommunication and misconduct. Without them, your company is forced to operate without the values and foundation that should be the core of your business.

While it should be obvious that safety procedures should be at the front of every company manual, for some businesses, it isn't obvious. They focus solely on efficient production without realizing they are shooting themselves in the foot. If they implemented a policy outlining safety procedures, they would not only promote efficiency, they would promote consistency. If workers are continuously getting hurt because they take shortcuts, and they cut corners because they weren't instructed otherwise, the likelihood of mistakes and injuries increases. This slows down

the operation. Have safety procedures in place from the onset so that employees know how to do their job in a safe and efficient manner.

Miscommunication often occurs as a result of not having written policies established. These policies should communicate to your employees your job expectations, their benefits, leave policies and termination procedures to name a few. Having everyone on the same page leaves no room for errors or misinterpretation. This also eliminates accusations of favoritism because all of your employees have to abide by the same rules at all times with no exceptions. Employee policies are necessary so you and your employees know how to handle situations that may arise in a work environment without exposing your business to serious litigation.

Policies protecting your employees from misconduct are essential in keeping your company safe from lawsuits. This policy should also outline disciplinary procedures and consequences per violation. A zero tolerance policy should be implemented to save you the grief and hassle of disciplining an employee over several occurrences rather than simply firing him after the first instance. Other examples of misconduct include stealing, sexual harassment or any harassment, and lying. Employees can be fired for gross misconduct immediately if they are found guilty of stealing or selling proprietary information, stealing from customers and falsifying records. Anything an employee does that affects your company's finances or ability to attract business must be proven before it is considered gross negligence.

It is not against the law if your business does not have an employee manual but it goes a long way to protect you from a troubled work environment and unwarranted lawsuits. Hiring a business attorney can help you outline what is the best way to create and establish your company policies and the most effective way to implement them. An attorney can also inform you on laws that are made to protect you and your business from legal situations once they occur. It is better to be prepared than to be caught by surprise from a disgruntled employee.

If you have questions about creating policies for your company or business, contact Michael Pruneda from The Pruneda Law Firm at 956-702-9675, or via web at: www.themcallenbusinesslawyer.com or www.michaelpruneda.com



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In the Spotlight



SMSDC held its 2012 South Padre Island Business Forum & Golf Tournament, "Surfing for Success" on October 10-12th in the breathtaking Pearl South Padre in South Padre Island, TX. This year's theme "Surfing for Success" brought together supplier diversity corporate representatives, minority businesses and people from all the Valley who were ready to re-connect. (Courtesy)

The University of Phoenix hosted a military transition event, which included a panel discussion "Transition to Civilian Life" featuring local veterans and University of Phoenix faculty who successfully transitioned to civilian employment following their military service. Panel participants included Billy Hollis (UOPX faculty, US Army and USMC veteran), Fernando Gutierrez (Retired US Army Colonel), Ken Romano (UOPX Director of Academic Affairs and US Air Force veteran), Jesse DeLeon (NHPO Chairman), Matt Ruszczak (President- Mission Chamber of Commerce), and Bonnie Gonzalez (CEO Workforce Solutions) (not pictured). (Courtesy)



Marlen Barrera and team presented her Lean Master Certification projects which focused on the packing and shipping area. Using Lean tools, the team improved the shipping area layout leading to a reduction in floor space needed and 851 hours annually and associated costs. (Courtesy)

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