

Lean Machine Design Queen focuses, markets and scores new customers



Susan Straley of Rentapen Inc. says SBDC assistance was crucial to her company's 48% increase in sales.

Susan Straley's business ranked as one of Waukesha County's "Top 10 Businesses of the Year" in 2012, but when she took over [Rentapen Inc.](#) [1] ownership and operations in 2011, the machine design company was experiencing weak growth.

"We needed to diversify our customer base," she says. "We would only get about two requests for quotes from new customers a year. Trying to build up sales and find other big customers, and figure out who to contact at those big companies was kind of overwhelming."

Having a degree in marketing but no experience running a business, Susan turned to the Waukesha County Business Alliance for advice. They referred her to the [University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Small Business Development Center](#) [2] (SBDC), part of the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center Network managed by UW-Extension. Susan considers the SBDC assistance crucial to her company's 48% increase in sales during the past year.

“The counselor walked us through the thought process to help us figure out what we’re really good at and what we need to be focusing on,” she says. “Instead of doing everything that we can possibly do, we want to focus on what we’re really good at and get even better at it. That provides more value to our customers.”

When asked what makes Rentapen Inc. unique, Susan responds, “We are specialists at weld fixtures. That’s what we do, and we do it so well and have been doing it so long that we have developed a line of standardized components that reduce the cost of weld fixtures.”

She provides an example: “A block that used to cost \$100 to design and build now costs manufacturers only about \$37 because now it’s a purchased component. They no longer have to design it, check it, create it themselves.”

In addition to helping Susan create a core marketing message based upon the company’s unique capabilities, the SBDC advisor introduced her to the benefits of social media. Connecting with potential customer contacts online has made it easier for Rentapen Inc. to attract new manufacturing contracts.

“The fact that I can get on LinkedIn and find out who is the engineering manager at some company is an amazing tool. To be able to find the people who could benefit from our services is so valuable,” she says. She also is using her [blog](#) [3] and [YouTube channel](#) [4] to educate engineers and students. She explains, “I feel strongly that those of us who have been working in design need to share our knowledge with those coming up behind us, so they don’t waste time making the same mistakes we made.”

Rentapen Inc. has created five new employee positions during the past year as a result of the remarkable sales growth generated through Susan’s marketing efforts. Creating jobs pleases her even more than increased revenues.

When asked about the nearly 50% sales growth, she says, “I also think that the growth of the people within the company is a measure of our success. We’re constantly learning, and, because we are learning new things, growing, changing with this growth, I see the development of the people within the company as well. In fact, growing people is in our mission statement: Rentapen provides jobs, training and opportunities for people who work together to help manufacturers reduce the costs of tooling to make their products.”

Susan still utilizes SBDC assistance for her business. She has also hired interns from area colleges. In addition to being the “Queen of Lean Machine Design” she also seems to be an expert at identifying and leveraging small business resources like the SBDC. “You’ve got to when you’re small,” she says. That’s advice she hopes will help other entrepreneurs as well.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.rentapen.com/>

[2] <http://www.wisconsinsbdc.org/SBDC/Offices/UW-WhitewaterSBDC.htm>

[3] <http://www.manufacturingthefuture.com/profiles/blog/list>

[4] <http://www.youtube.com/user/rentapeninc>

[5] <https://secure.wisconsinsbdc.org/busanswer/>