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2009 Lifetime Achievement in Business Award Honoree: Patti Penny

Family is key to success for Penmac

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Patti Penny says she's honored to be the first woman to receive Springfield Business Journal's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Then again, strong women are nothing new to the Penmac Personnel Services Inc. founder, who says growing up with a single mother and living on a dairy farm from the age of 9 have helped shape her into the entrepreneur and philanthropist she is today. It also helps, she adds, to live in the Ozarks.

"There are still a few male chauvinists around ... some men still want the Scarlett O'Hara routine," Penny says. "But I've never encountered it here in the Midwest - people have always been very open to me."

That openness has served Penny well. Her 21-year-old company started with one Springfield office and now places more than 4,000 associates through 35 offices in five states.

Penmac has received numerous accolades in recent years, including being named one of the Top 25 Women's Business Enterprises in 2008 by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, and two stints in the last five years on SBJ's Dynamic Dozen list for the area's fastest-growing companies. Penny also has received numerous individual honors. She received an honorary doctorate in public affairs from Missouri State University in May; she was named one of the 2008 Enterprising Women of the Year by Enterprising Women Magazine; and she was one of 12 to receive the 2006 Missourian Award.

Patti Says

- "Put your best effort toward pleasing God. That has helped me so much. There's so much stress in the beginning, there are things you can't learn right away. But if you can stay in tune to what God wants, it helps."
- "You need a diverse group of folks around you. We do a lot more pre-employment testing now, because evaluation to get the right people is so important. I've tried growing people who weren't right for the business, and that's a disaster."
- "Hire people to keep the books straight. You have to keep up with the books, and it has to be right - the (Internal Revenue Service) doesn't have a lot of sympathy for that."
- "You have to have a strong work ethic, especially in the beginning. If you're not a high-energy person, you probably won't like owning your own business, because you have to be able to multitask."
- "You need to give back when you can without expecting something in return - unless it's



Penny says she still relies on family, including her daughter, Penmac President Paula Adams, and her son, John, who's in charge of the company's technology needs. Penny says 13 family members work for the company.

Penny credits leaning on her family's individual strengths with propelling her company forward. Adams, for example, focuses on employee relations.

"I'm not good at growing people, and she's very patient and takes on that part," Penny says. "She's good at helping people improve and grow in the business."

Penny admits that technology isn't one of her strong suits either, and she says her son is the primary reason the company has gone mostly paperless.

"We do payroll for about 4,000 people each week, and we were always dealing with paper - time sheets, faxes and the like," she says. "We still deal with some of that, but the electronic side helps a lot."

Penny says in a company as large as Penmac - with roughly 100 in-house employees - it's important for her to have those familiar faces.

"We're a family business, and I can always trust my family," Penny says. "John will disagree with me when other people won't - he'll pound the table and say, 'This isn't right.' You need someone who plays that role."

Penny especially needs that family support now, amid the recession. She says Penmac's business is down 25 percent from a year ago, continuing a slide that began in fourth-quarter 2007.

Exacerbating economic pressures is the fact that several manufacturing companies have closed or moved abroad in recent years.

Penmac has pared down from 50 offices it operated in 2007, and the company has diversified to take some pressure off the manufacturing segment. Last year, Penmac began offering part-time medical care workers through a partnership with St. John's Health System.

Ever the optimist, Penny fully expects the economy to recover - and she says her

(to) a politician. Then you need to expect something in return."

- "Nobody will care about your business as much as you do."

A Serving Spirit

Patti Penny enjoys giving back - especially to the town of Seymour, where she spent much of her childhood.

She donated \$100,000 in the early 1990s toward a \$300,000 challenge grant to renovate the city's public library, and she is still helping the city raise funds to pay for an Ozarks Family YMCA facility worth more than \$3 million.

She also supports Breast Cancer Foundation of the Ozarks, Missouri State University, Ozarks Technical Community College and various local arts organizations, including MSU's annual Tent Theatre. In June, Penny was honored with a Gift of Time Award for her volunteer efforts.

A Famous Face

While some people in Springfield may not know exactly who Patti Penny is, they've probably seen her face - albeit disguised - in her company's infamous advertisements on the back of Springfield city buses.

Penny says the ads, which have featured her dressed up as a variety of famous people from Groucho Marx to Elvis Presley to Donald Trump, were her idea.

"I always said if I had another life to live, I'd want to be in marketing and public relations," she says, adding that the ads go along with the company's tradition of unusual giveaways to customers, such as hummingbird feeders with the

company will ready.

"When businesses do start back up, services like mine will be on the front burner," she says. "Businesspeople will use services to handle that for them."

But when business does pick up, Penny probably won't be as involved in the day-to-day operations of the company. She has been trying for several years to reduce her role with the company, and now she feels comfortable enough with the people in charge that she can begin that transition in earnest.

slogan, "Keep your business humming with Penmac."

Not all of Penny's ideas for bus ads, however, have been so well-received.

"I wanted to do Marilyn Monroe - I was going to do, 'Need a job, Mr. President?'" she says. "But my employees talked me out of that."

"There's really not a lot for me to do at the business anymore - other people are taking care of it," she says. "When I leave now, I really don't worry about things."

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