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Hardware distributor drives hard to secure footing

By VINCENT DONATO

Drive and an engagingly open manner are two qualities immediately evident about Elmsford hardware business owner Andis Woodlief.

And, she needed both in her struggle to find new business opportunities in a changing economy for Screws and More, a distributor of screws and fasteners founded by her father, Samuel Silverman.

"I'm the best leading economic indicator you can have," Woodlief said, referring to her business' sensitivity to overall economic conditions.

A couple of years ago, it looked like that sensitivity would cause big trouble for Screws and More as traditional customers, mostly manufacturers, began cutting back production and orders.

The solution, Woodlief found, was to broaden her customer base, but continue to cherish her existing clientele. Ultimately, Screws and More discovered a new pool of customers among construction contractors.

To do this, she had to be open to new ways of doing business, learn new skills and form new connections. All of which took lots of hard work and an assertive attitude.

A key element was suggested by a customer. Woodlief might find a market among subcontractors on construction and other projects if Screws and More became certified by New York state as a Women-Owned Business Enterprise. Public and publicly funded projects often have goals for doing business with women- and minority-owned enterprises.

The next step was finding the new customers.

"She (Woodlief) just walked into the trailer one day in February '02 and told me what she sold. I gave her my project directory and invited her to go to the subcontractors. Every contractor in the construction business has to buy screws and fasteners," recalled Bill Grutta, project manager

COMPETITIVE EDGE: SCREWS AND MORE



Andis Woodlief, owner of Screws and More, was forced to broaden her customer base when the economy caused many of her clients to cut back.

on the Bank Street Common development in White Plains for HRH Construction.

Being a women-owned business and a local business was a definite help. Both HRH and the project developer had goals to encourage the use of women- and minority-owned subcontractors and an additional policy of encouraging the use of local firms, explained Grutta.

"She did a very good job of servicing the subcontractors. I think she'll do well," he added.

Woodlief doesn't remember it as quite that easy. "At first, the subcontractors were a little skeptical (about buying from a

woman). We needed an ice-breaker. We designed T-shirts with the slogan 'Just screw it' as giveaways," Woodlief said.

All of a sudden, Woodlief had to learn a new set of products and scramble to add new suppliers as the screws and fasteners used in construction are different from those used in most manufacturing processes.

To learn more about the products, Woodlief teamed up with Powers Fasteners of New Rochelle sales representative Leon Dykas.

"He took me around for six months and taught me how to do product demonstra-

Continued on back

Hardware distributor drives hard to secure footing —

Continued from front

tions," Woodlief said.

"I had just started with Powers. She'd knock on the door and generate interest and then I'd go in and demonstrate the product," Dykas said.

"You have to know the exact properties and limits of each item ... you have to meet the specifications and then pricing and personal relations become important," he commented.

Screws and More was started by Silverman, an accountant, in 1970, as Northeastern Screw and Bolt Corp.

Woodlief, a White Plains native, wanted to work for her dad after graduating from Ithaca College with a degree in business administration. He discouraged her at the time and she spent 10 years as a printing sales representative. After Woodlief's first child began nursery school, Silverman relented and took her into the business on a part-time basis.

"My father had health problems, as they

grew so did my responsibilities," she said.

When Silverman died in 1998, he left 200 customers, 500,000 pounds of inventory and not much of a succession plan.

"He kept things pretty close to the vest" Woodlief remembered, as she recalled sitting in the office until midnight with green ledger sheets trying to get a handle on the business.

Woodlief decided to make a go of it on her own and purchased the company from her mother. She has a brother and a sister, but neither is involved in the business.

Customers and staff were very loyal. Woodlief calls director of administration Susan Peterson, who has been with the firm since 1980, "my other self."

"The daughter has done an outstanding job of taking the business over and maintaining a high level of quality and service," observed Richard Robson, purchasing manager for Gorrel Enterprises of Indiana, Pa., a vinyl replacement window manufacturer. He had personally been dealing with

Screws and More since 1980.

A competitor, too, has nice words for Woodlief. "One of the better people in business," said Mordi Robinson, co-owner, with son Greg, of Robinson Screw Corp. in Mount Vernon. Robinson distributes screws and bolts and also re-packages these items for other distributors, including Screws and More.

Woodlief put her company's annual sales at \$1.5 million. The company has five employees. She is looking for more customers. But aware of construction's boom and bust nature, she doesn't want to become overly dependent on it.

Woodlief, who lives in Yorktown with her husband, Wesley, and their four children — Zachary, 19, Alex, 15, Sloane, 14, and Chase, 5 — likes it when her 5-year-old points to a construction site and says "that's mommy's project."

She admits to getting her own "thrill at watching a project I've delivered to just explode out of the ground."



S A M

Dragonfly logo to honor founder

A dragonfly, so light and fragile, almost ethereal, is not the motif one would expect a distributor of screws and other hardware to choose as a symbol. Nonetheless, the image of a dragonfly, usually with the acronym S.A.M. beneath it, adorns much of the promotional media, Web site, T-shirts and business cards developed by Elmsford screw distributor Screws and More. This is why.

Screws and More's predecessor company, Northeastern Screw and Bolt Corp., was founded by Samuel Silverman, who loved to fly his private plane.

Silverman died on Oct. 1, 1998, after a long illness. At the cemetery, a dragonfly hovered with the mourners throughout the service, according to daughter Andis Woodlief. Another dragonfly stayed in Silverman's home all during the mourning

period. When that period was over, a dragonfly was found dead at the bedroom door.

When Woodlief took over the business, she renamed it Screws and More, in honor of her father, because the acronym, SAM, matched her father's nickname Sam. She chose the dragonfly as the motif for the company, in remembrance of her father.

Woodlief remembers her father as a good teacher and a good listener who very much encouraged her to succeed.

"He taught me that there was never anything that I couldn't do because I was a woman. He prepared me to make my way in a man's industry," she fondly recalled.

— By VINCENT DONATO

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