

GROWING YOUR BUSINESS



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Leayne Johnson (left) and Dorothy Willetts are the owners of Willetts-Johnson Interior Design in Indio.

Co-workers took time designing own business

Experts put lots of planning into Willetts-Johnson Interior Design company

BY FERDIE DE VEGA
THE DESERT SUN

Dorothy Willetts and Leayne Johnson say they started their own interior design business only after a great deal of research and planning.

"We met with anyone we could think of," Johnson said, adding they sought advice from lawyers, accountants, small business owners and Brad Mix, consultant at the Coachella Valley Small Business Development Center.

The women had worked together for 5½ years at the design center at Rancho La Quinta Country Club.

"We're both fiscally conservative," Willetts said. "We analyze

WILLETTS JOHNSON INTERIOR DESIGN

Headquarters: Indio
Owners: Dorothy Willetts and Leayne Johnson
Founded: May 2004
Business description: Interior design business
Employees: None

Projected revenues: \$3 million
Source of startup funding: Personal funds
Cost of startup: Less than \$10,000
Information: 777-9044, wjdesign@dc.rr.com

everything."

They kept in touch with past clients, she said. "We use them a lot as our mentors."

Johnson said their decision came at a time when Rancho La Quinta was nearly built out.

"It was time to form our own company," Willetts said.

The women started Willetts Johnson Interior Design in May 2004 in Willetts' previous home.

"We work well together," Willetts said. "We complement each other."

Willetts is from the East Coast and graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago and worked at various companies in that city, including Bruce Gregga Interiors.

Johnson is from Seattle and graduated from Bellevue Community College's interior design school.

Both women moved to the desert in 1998 and began working at Rancho La Quinta a month apart.

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Interior

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ness, they have mainly worked on high-end homes. They have done one commercial job, a production/marketing office for Point 7 West in Indian Wells, Willetts said.

She said they design "everything," including floors, built-ins, electrical and plumbing fixtures and bedding. "We'll do turnkey, everything in the house."

Their business is now located in Indio in Willetts' current home, which has a spacious office with its own separate entrance.

Willetts and Johnson recently discussed the growth of their business.

Growth

QUESTION: How much have your sales/revenues grown in the last year?

ANSWER: Willetts: From May to December 2004, we made \$30,000. From January to December 2005, we made \$1.5 million. We'll look to double that this year.

Q: What do you attribute the growth to?

A: Willetts: Layne and I are both honest people. We like to be up-front with our clients. We're that way with vendors and clients. We've gotten a lot of referrals from our vendors and clients. We're very professional.

And now that we've gotten some high-end houses done, we can use those to increase sales.

Q: What practical lessons can another business learn from your experience?

A: Willetts: Keep your overhead costs low.

Johnson: Talk to anyone you can think of to help you.

Willetts: Be conservative in your fiscal projections. Save money before you start your business.

Johnson: Realize there's going to be a learning curve.

Willetts: It should be fun.

Q: What have your biggest mistakes been?

A: Willetts: Probably not marketing sooner. That's a big one. That's significant.

Johnson: There are some mar-

keting opportunities we should have taken. Our first year we were growing very quickly so the marketing took a back seat for a little while.

Q: Do you have outside experts (lawyer, accountant, etc.)?

A: Willetts: Our mentors. A lot of our clients are business owners — and very successful business owners. Some are attorneys. Some are financial advisers.

Johnson: And books. We read a lot.

Willetts: We read "The Girl's Guide to Starting Your Own Business."

Johnson: We'd have conference calls with people — hours at a time.

Willetts: One (mentor) reviewed our business plan with us.

Johnson: We talked many times to Brad Mix (consultant with the Coachella Valley Small Business Development Center).

We did research on the computer.

The market

Q: How big is the market?

A: Willetts: Big.

Johnson: There's a wide range of designers, too, from the high end to ...

Willetts: There are a certain number of designers we hear about. But there's plenty (of business) to go around.

Q: Who are your competitors?

A: Willetts: Other small firms like ourselves.

Johnson: There's a lot of one- and two-person (firms). Some have storefronts, but most don't.

Q: How much attention do you pay to your competitors?

A: Willetts: Other than (when) developing our business plan, none. You're aware of what they're doing because it's a small valley.

Q: What have you done to set your business apart?

A: Willetts: Definitely our design center knowledge (is helpful). Definitely the fact that we're from different parts of the country.

Q: How will your business be different five years from now?

A: Willetts: Hopefully we'll be in a larger geographic area, we'll be

in an office space and we'll have people working for us.

Johnson: More support staff.

Finances

Q: Who handles the accounting?

A: Johnson: We do the day-to-day. There's an interior design program we use on the computer. Our bookkeeper comes in monthly, and we have an accountant in San Clemente.

Customer service

Q: How do you focus on customer service?

A: Johnson: Gaining trust. Because if you don't have the client's trust ...

Willetts: We're only as good as our last job.

Johnson: Because we are referral-based.

Willetts: And they all talk, once you get into a country club. Plus, we get a lot of referrals from sales people and design centers.

We're both pretty straightforward.

Johnson: We're very open and honest with them.

Expansion

Q: How will you decide when to expand?

A: Johnson: Part of it is the natural progression of things.

Willetts: When we have ... a certain amount of reserves, then we'll decide.

Johnson: There's so much paperwork involved.

Marketing

Q: How do you market your business?

A: Willetts: We've done a few mass mailings and advertised in 111 Magazine.

Johnson: We've networked with real estate agents and put brochures in a few areas.

Willetts: We're expanding our Web site and thinking of having more ads in magazines.

Johnson: The first year was really figuring out the business.

Q: How much will you spend on marketing?

A: Willetts: We don't even know. We still have to research that.

Johnson: Like we've done at the beginning of the business, we're going to talk to different people who advertise in different places and see what the return has been.

The startup

Q: Did you have a business plan?

A: Willetts: Yes.

Johnson: Three binders' worth.

Q: Did you follow it?

A: Willetts: Yes.

Q: Have you updated it?

A: Willetts: We need to.

Johnson: It's been put on the list of things to do.

Ferdie De Vega covers small business for The Desert Sun. He can be reached at 778-4620 or via e-mail at Ferdie.DeVega@thedesertsun.com.

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