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Rebecca Ufkes

President of UEC Electronics receives recognition as South Carolina Small Business Person of the Year



Compiled by Rene Smith
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Q: You recently returned from Washington, D.C., where you represented South Carolina in the National Small Business Person of the Year competition and received the award of first runner-up. How does it feel to be recognized at this kind of national event?

A: It was a great honor to be both nominated and selected as the state winner for South Carolina. Receiving an award at the national level was an unexpected and exciting surprise. National recognition is a well-earned accomplishment for the entire UEC team. It definitely feels very good to us all to have our efforts, hard work and successes validated. We have our trophies proudly displayed, and we are still celebrating!

Q: What was the most interesting or beneficial part of attending National Small Business Week?

A: The trip to the White House, seeing the president and the reception at the State Department were definitely highlights of the trip; however, meeting and learning about so many other small businesses from all over the United States was a really enjoyable and interesting experience.

Q: Did you get to do any sightseeing while you were in D.C.?

A: Absolutely. My daughter accompanied me as my "official guest." We flew in early and stayed an extra day to enjoy D.C. and to look at a few college campuses. We did a lot of walking to see the Capitol, White House and monuments. We chose shopping and touring Georgetown over the American History Museum as the weather was so nice. We definitely enjoyed the restaurants!

Q: Your company, UEC Electronics, creates parts and devices that are supplied to the health care, maritime, military and automotive industries. What is your favorite device UEC has created and why?

A: That is similar to asking which child is your favorite, so there really is no single answer. There are also a few I can't discuss due to patents pending or customer nondisclosure agreements. Two recent favorites are the Tru-D Area Sterilization system that we developed and built for a local doctor/entrepreneur, and the other is a power distribution unit we designed and built for the Marine Corps' MRAP program at SPAWAR Atlantic.

The Tru-D system is very effective and is starting to make an impact nationwide in the prevention of nosocomial (hospital- or health care-related) infections. The MRAP PDU was a small but significant contribution to ensuring the safety of our war fighters.

I am also very excited about a new renewable energy power solution that we are developing for the Marine Corps. This will be a very exciting program.

Q: What is it like to open and run a business with your husband?

A: After 15 years of working together, that topic could yield hours of discussion and would probably make an entertaining reality show. We definitely spend a lot of time together. We complement each other's capabilities and strengths very well, which has resulted in a productive working relationship. Now that we have grown in size and have a key management team, we strategically focus on different areas in the company, which has reduced how much time we spend together at work. We both have very driven, Type A and slightly stubborn personalities, so when we disagree, it gets interesting. We now have a rule about

keeping work at work; however, when you live with your business partner, it is sometimes very difficult to do. Even if we don't speak, we read each other's thoughts, which can get really scary. Overall, it has been a great experience, and we are amazed at what the UEC team has accomplished.

Q: According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, more than half of Americans either own or work for a small business. As a small-business owner, how has your business been affected by the economy?

A: We are currently very busy, and our forecast looks good; however, a volatile and challenging economy compounded by new undefined government regulations and potential higher taxes add additional stress and complexity in forecasting and business planning. We are working closely with our customers to secure future business as well as actively marketing to expand our customer base. The new legislation, especially with respect to health care, is still unclear and the impact on small businesses is not defined. There are many issues that we are monitoring, but we feel that we are well-positioned and remain confident moving forward.

Q: In 2009, your company laid off employees. Was it the first time?

A: Unfortunately, no. In the late 1990s, in our third year of business, we were heavily dependent on a handful of customers. One of our major industrial customers experienced a severe order reduction due to a slowdown in the trucking industry, which eventually trickled on down to us. We laid off three employees, a significant percentage at that time. Our subsequent strategy and success in achieving market diversity was a direct result of that experience.

Q: What was that like?

A: Having to lay off team members is definitely one of the top three most undesirable activities of any business owner and one that we work very hard to avoid. In a small-business environment, it is a very personal experience.

Q: What would you say to encourage readers to support small businesses in their hometown?

A: I am an avid supporter of small businesses as I believe it is important to utilize, support and develop relationships with local, state and Southeast business partners. Money spent at a local business stays in the community.

In our industrial and military environment, UEC focuses on teaming with and having supplier relationships with other small businesses as much as possible. In

many cases, the close proximity and established relationships result in faster deliveries and lower costs.

In the retail/consumer environment, it is equally important. Smaller boutiques, specialty shops and creative and unique small businesses add interest and variety. They need an active local customer base to remain financially viable.

Their success and ability to provide jobs is very important to us all, especially in an area such as Charleston. My husband and I prefer to purchase from local stores and vendors as opposed to Internet sites or big-box stores whenever reasonable.