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L.J. BUTTERFIELD



A basketful of drive

For this entrepreneur, the past is prologue

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You might think that somebody with a name like Charlotte O'Banion would speak with a brogue. She doesn't. She speaks with an accent developed from growing up in Louisiana. "I have a twang,"

she said with a twang. Not only that, but the federal government has classified O'Banion's Trumbull corporate gift business as "a disadvantaged Asian minority business," she said. "My mother is Japanese, my dad's Irish, I'm from Louisiana, and I'm a woman," she said with humor. "That should make me a triple-minority

disadvantaged business."

And while neither the federal nor state governments recognize being from Louisiana as a disadvantage, O'Banion scores on two of the three, opening doors to companies and corporations that do business with the government and that must set aside a certain amount of their buying power for minority businesses.

"I figured, I'm a minority, and nobody is going to see you cold call," O'Banion said, explaining why she sought minority certification about 17 years ago. "This field is very competitive, and promotional vendors come a dime a dozen. Most corporations are mandated to give minority businesses a certain percentage of their spend each year," so why not leverage that into business contacts?

She filled out the necessary paperwork and was certified by the state and by the U.S. Small Business Administration as a women-owned, minority business, with the added SBA distinction of being disadvantaged. All that is fine, "but you'd better know your stuff," she said. "If they need 50 shirts tomorrow, they need to know they'll get their 50 shirts tomorrow."

Hired on the spot

O'Banion was raised in Monroe, La., "the home of Terry Bradshaw," and attended the University of Southern Louisiana — "The number-one party school back then" — where she earned a bachelor's degree in speech and hearing therapy. "Then I went on to be a stewardess for American Airlines because I hated speech and hearing therapy," she said.

At the time she joined the airline, she had moved to Dallas to attend the Dallas Fashion Institute, "because I wanted to learn about clothing and I thought I wanted to own my own store and sell clothing one day," she said. "While I was going to school, I worked

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at the Dallas Apparel Mart selling clothes to buyers, when somebody told me American Airlines was hiring and I should go try it out.

"I thought it would be fun, so I went for an interview that day and was hired on the spot," she said. "I was surprised, because people said it was so hard to make it as a stewardess — personality, eye contact, the way you look, the way you talk. It's not like that now. They don't seem to do any kind of screening. Have you seen the flight attendants lately?"

She joined American in 1981 "flying all over the world and offering coffee, tea and certainly not me," she said. Six years later, she bought a copy of Entrepreneur magazine. "In the back was an offer for a business plan on how to own and operate your own gift basket business," she said. "I bought it for 50 bucks," and began studying the business plan during layovers. "It seemed fun, so I started making gift baskets out of my house" in Westport, she said. "I made a gift basket and gave it to a friend for her birthday. She called a couple of weeks later and asked me could she buy one to give to her friend. Then that friend calls. The next thing you know, I was doing 50 gift baskets a month."

She quit the airline in 1988 to devote her full time to her fledgling business.

Crash and burn

At the time, O'Banion was filling the gift baskets with bath products and selling them for between \$35 and \$50 a pop. "Then I got my wholesale license and started going to trade centers, adding potpourri and loofah bath sponges, then started getting into food, muffin mixes, jams and jelly, pastas and the next thing you know, I had all kinds of baskets."

As her business grew, she moved it out of her house and into a small

room in Westport "and started advertising in every newspaper that asked me to do it," she said. "I didn't know if I was going to advertise to the public or going to do corporate. I didn't know where I was going yet."

One of those local ads was spotted by an HBO executive, and "I was doing their gift baskets for the next two years, shipping them all over the world — 10,000 baskets a year just from HBO," she said. "So then I rented the next room. I went to 9-by-12, and I got a call from Oxford Health Plans when they just started. The next thing you know, my business grew from a half-million to 2 million and from one employee to nine employees in nine months. I was doing sweatshirts, T-shirts, sports bottles, coffee mugs — any kind of giveaway. I couldn't get enough computers and employees fast enough."

It turned out to be, she said, "the biggest mistake I made in all of my 20 years of doing this."

She had moved her operations to a 6,400-square-foot facility in Trumbull "so I could warehouse all this product I was doing because we didn't have any room and were walking over shirts and sweatshirts and boxes," she said. "It was insane."

But without warning Oxford ran into a financial buzz saw "and its stock went from like 98 to like 20," she said. In one day her business collapsed. "They stopped ordering promotional products. They just didn't have any money. It was a mess."

The mistake, she said, was that "I

put all my eggs in one basket. I was so busy growing so fast that I didn't have time to go out and market new customers. Because you're so busy keeping up with one customer, you're not growing your company through other customers.

"I had to get rid of seven employees and start all over again."

She's back

This time she was a bit more savvy. She became more involved with the Connecticut Minority Supplier Development Council — this past May she won her second Supplier of the Year Award from the council — and began networking at council and other networking opportunities. "But you can't just stand there and wait for them to come to you," O'Banion said. "You have to keep suiting up and showing up, nonstop."

Those council networking events paid off for her, big time. "We're back," she said of her GBG, The Corporate Gift Source Inc. "We're now contracted with United Technologies in Farmington" — and its subsidiaries, Pratt & Whitney, Otis Elevator, Carrier and Sikorsky Aircraft. "And now we're more spread out," with corporate customers such as Goldman Sachs, GE Capital, Oxford Health Plans "again," ING and the New York Marathon.

She's up to seven employees now and revenues of "under \$5 million," about the same as she was doing when she was concentrating on Oxford. "I'm looking for corporate customers that are willing to give us a shot," she said.

Five years from now she hopes to be at about 15 employees and \$10 million in revenues, but "no more than \$15 million," she said. "I don't want to lose what we have, the personal, one-on-one relations we've developed. And we also make it fun. When I was in those airline aisles, we had fun. Otherwise, life would be boring."

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