

INSIDE TRACK

CYNTHIA KAY



Cynthia Kay's extensive background in broadcast journalism fits nicely with her career in commercial communications.

BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/MICHAEL BUCK

Kay Wants Your Attention

By Daniel Schoonmaker

GRAND RAPIDS — Cynthia Kay admits that it has taken some effort to settle into her new Front Street offices these past few months. But the founder of Cynthia Kay and Co. is no stranger to change.

Since she left broadcasting in favor of commercial communications, she has seen her technology-dominated industry change and change again.

Her company's market has expanded past regional and industry boundaries and now offers a wider range of higher quality products that can be delivered in a fraction of the time, and distribution has become only a click of a mouse away.

But one of the most significant changes has come in the nature of her competition — not competition from other media production companies for her customers, but for the audience, prospects and potential customers that those customers are trying to reach.

"I tell people that if you think your competition is the presenter from the other company that goes on in front of or behind you, it's not," she said. "You're competing with what people see on a national and international scale.

"If you look at what people see on television today, look at the special effects in movies or what's on the Web or at shows they go to — people are used to a high-

BRIEFLY

Name: Cynthia Kay
Title: President and owner
Company: Cynthia Kay and Co.
Born: Grand Rapids
Resides: Cascade
Family: Single with two godchildren
Organizations: American Marketing Association West Michigan, IIT Technical Advisory Board, Coffee Dunkers of America, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church
Biggest Career Break: Leaving broadcasting and starting her own company.

quality communications piece," Kay explained. "People are used to looking at that, so their taste level is significantly higher. Take Fox News and pull that apart, you've got tickers and sidebars and all this other stuff — businesses are competing against that."

Kay is well suited for the converging playing field between business communications and mass communications.

She has spent nearly 17 years helping companies reach their audiences, whether internal or external. But before that, she earned nearly as much experience in the mass communications field, working for 13 years in the local broadcasting market.

As a music major at MSU, Kay had

See Kay, page 6

Kay

Continued from page 5

hoped to graduate early, but upon discovering that she needed to wait a year to complete her coursework, she convinced the then-Department of Radio and Television to allow her to take some upper level telecommunications courses.

She became so intrigued by the field that she added it as a second major, and went on to pursue graduate education in telecommunications instead of music.

While in graduate school, Kay realized that she couldn't "sing for her supper" and began searching out employment within the local broadcast market.

"I was relentless," she recalled. "I was knocking on doors everywhere. I was trying to break into the market. I had no

experience and all I was getting was really nice rejection letters."

When a frustrated Kay was told by a receptionist at then-WKZO Channel 3 that no one would see her, Kay explained that she wasn't going to leave until someone came out and took her resume.

"I said, 'All I want is two seconds; just have someone come out,'" Kay recalled. "So she gets on the phone with the production manager and says, 'She won't leave.' So he came out and gave me five minutes. 'He said, 'Cynthia, no one leaves here. We haven't had an opening in a long, long time.' A week later, WKZO called back and offered her a job."

Kay was to receive two weeks' training and then replace a dissatisfied on-air per-

sonality. Her predecessor, however, opted to leave early, and Kay found herself on live TV her second day on the job.

For five years, she was a feature reporter and hosted both the noontime talk show "Accent" and children's program "Channel 3 Clubhouse."

From there she became an executive producer at WZZM Channel 13, eventually before embarking on an award-winning stint as an investigative journalist.

During Kay's final years in the broadcasting field, she noticed an increasing number of businesses seeking out production services from the local stations. The stations were never able to serve these businesses, however, because there was

too much work to be done just to get out the daily news. But with her employer's permission, she began to seize that opportunity on a part-time basis.

When the station became embroiled in turbulent management changes, Kay decided it was time to leave broadcasting in favor of expanding her production side-light into a full-time enterprise.

"There was this market there for people who wanted high-quality communications and I had access to them," Kay said. "I kind of stepped into it at first, that's how our first two customers came on board."

"Then I got some really good advice from a business person," she said. "He told me that you can't just step into it; it can't just be a sideline. You have to make that huge leap if you want to be successful."

The industry Kay leaped into has since seen an immense change with the advent of new media technologies. Kay's offerings all fit a basic niche when the company launched, including corporate overview videos, employee orientation videos, new product videos and other narrowly defined instructional or informational videos.

Today, many of Kay's customers remain the same, but the services they require are hugely different.

"We're don't get slotted anymore," she said. "We're not just the video people anymore."

One of the first local media companies to adopt AVID digital nonlinear editing and DVD technology, Kay has worked hard to stay ahead of the technology curve just far enough to meet an emerging demand.

Along with the new products, Kay has become involved with more aspects of a client's business.

Kay might work with executive staff consulting on media training and presentations, work with marketing to produce external communications pieces, provide training to or produce training materials for dealers and internal salespeople, and even create proposal pieces for products that don't yet exist.

And all of these things can be done using the same video footage and raw media assets.

While the scope of Kay's business within a company has grown, the small firm has seen its customer base expand in other areas as well.

No longer are only public companies and large manufacturers taking advantage of media productions; small and medium-sized manufacturers are accessing them as well. Other businesses that had long resisted Kay's products also are opening up, as the service providers like lawyers, insurance vendors, accountants and consulting firms recognize the need for high-value media to compete for prospects' attention.

Geographical boundaries have disappeared as well.

"Gerber would be a great example," Kay said. "When they were in West Michigan, we did business with them. Then they moved to New Jersey and that business went with them. Now they're back with us."

"I think we're entering a new stage in our business. But it's not a new area for us, it's just marketing and packaging what we've done really well in West Michigan for so long outside of the area."

Like its founder, all of Cynthia Kay and Co.'s employees have experience within the broadcast or cable industries. Unlike much of its competition, however, all of the company's creative processes, production and distribution are done in-house.

Kay's family does have a history of small business success in West Michigan. She is one of three children of Gus and Ann Afendoulis of Afendoulis Cleaners. ■