

# Kay Wins Chamber Honor

By Daniel Schoonmaker

GRAND RAPIDS — In an era of rapid change for the West Michigan economy, there probably couldn't have been a better choice for the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce 2005 Small Business of the Year.

For 18 years, Cynthia Kay & Co. has seen its technology-dominated industry change and change again. All of the market and economic changes attacking West Michigan's small businesses have been seen of late in its market, and each one has been overcome through adaptation and perseverance.

This has already been a dynamic year for the firm. It moved to a new office on Front Street last fall and in March was named one of three Top Women Owned Businesses in the revenue of less than \$1.5 million category by the Business Journal.

The chamber will honor President and owner Cynthia Kay this Wednesday during its 2005 Small Business Celebration and Business Showcase at DeVos Place.

Kay founded the media production firm after an award-winning 13-year career in broadcasting. During the final years of that career, 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.

With her employer's permission, she began to seize that opportunity on a part-time basis.

"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.

Her company has since expanded past regional and industry boundaries with higher quality products that can be delivered in a fraction of the time, with distribution only a click of a mouse away.

Like West Michigan as whole, her core clients have endured layoffs and turbulent times in recent years, but she has found more clients here and abroad.

It isn't just public companies and large manufacturers taking advantage of media productions today; small and medium-sized manufacturers are accessing them, as well. Other businesses that had long resisted Kay's products have opened up, as service providers such as lawyers, insurance vendors, accountants and consulting firms recognize the need for high-value media to compete for prospects' attention.

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— Cynthia Kay

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.



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Kay

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," she added. "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."

She also now finds her firm involved with more aspects of a client's business.

For just one client, 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.

Again representative of the region, the most significant change for Kay 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 cus-

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tomers 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-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's family has a history of small business success in West Michigan. She is one of three children of Gus and Ann Afendoulis of Afendoulis Cleaners.

The luncheon's keynote speaker will be Kevin Elko, author of "Nerves of Steel."

Elko makes his living by traveling the country offering powerful life management techniques to top athletes and corporate employees alike. His goal as a consultant has been to help people perform better, manage stress and become "mentally tough," as he puts it.

"When I was out there meeting with groups, I realized people were looking for answers," he said. "There's a lot of stress out there. I wanted to give guidelines on how to handle the ups and downs and challenges of life."

Among Elko's past clients are Merrill Lynch, the NFL's Dallas Cowboys, and Travelers Insurance Co.

Following the luncheon is the chamber's second annual Business Showcase. Perhaps the year's best representation of West Michigan businesses, the expo will feature exhibits from more than 100 chamber members. ■