

THIS WEEK



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# BUSINESS

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SECTION D

## BUSINESS PROFILE

# Determination drives entrepreneur to award

**Engineering consultant is an SBA Minority Business Person of the Year**

By PRADNYA JOSHI  
of the Journal Sentinel staff

For Terry Ni, growing her business to its current size has only been accomplished by one thing: determination.

That's what it took to go from a one-person operation in the basement of her home to 54 full-time employees in three offices in seven years.

A case in point: 3½ years ago, her environmental engineering consulting firm was one of several invited to the Camp Douglas' Air National Guard facility

in Juneau County to make a presentation. But the day before, weather forecasters were predicting 6 to 10 inches of snow. So her staff left at 5 a.m. They ended up taking nearly six hours to get to Camp Douglas, but they made it.

The other firms hadn't shown up, assuming the presentations would be re-scheduled, she said.

"The client has become one of our regular customers," said Ni, president and chief executive of TN & Associates of Wauwatosa.

Now, she is one of the recipients of the U.S. Small Business Administration's Wisconsin Minority Business Person of the Year award.

But growing her company to its present size did not come quickly. When Ni started in 1989, she used her entire savings and money she and her husband had been putting away for their children's college tuition.

Six years later, a bank finally was willing to give her company a line of credit based on signed contracts, and it was only this year that her company took out a loan, one from the Small Business Administration.

"You don't win business just because you put out a presentation," she said, adding that she may win one in every 15 to 20 attempts.

But her dedication has won her repeat business, according to clients.

"When I first saw her, she was a one-person firm," said Roger Cupps, project team leader at the Department of Transportation's Waukesha district

office. "She has given us a quality product, on-time with no hassle."

And, when things are not perfect, Ni is eager to make improvements, Cupps said.

"She wants to do a good job and not just for the bottom line," he said.

Ni moved to the U.S. from Taiwan with her husband in 1978 when both were seeking their master's degrees at Illinois Institute of Technology. Soon afterward, her husband got a job in Milwaukee; she joined him a couple of years later. She worked as an engineer at two environmental engineering firms in town, first at CDM and later with Kapur & Associates, before leaving to have her daughter.

Ni went most of her first year without landing any business, but finally got a \$2,000 job.

Slowly, she said, she started developing a client base and a reputation.

Ni's business really began growing about 4½ years ago after she diversified by adding hazardous waste management to her civil and municipal engineering disciplines.

"The adjustment to the market is very important," Ni said. "Government regulations have been changing from year to year and from presidency to presidency, and you have to know how to adjust to it."

Highway, bridge and other construction projects are still the company's bread and butter, but projects now include Superfund sites, air-quality management, risk assessment and low-level radioactive material management. Two years ago, she opened an office in Oak Ridge, Tenn., and one in Cincinnati.

"We started doing a lot more scientific work rather than engineering," she said.

She has also had to use a little creative marketing, such as abbreviating her Catholic baptismal name.

"While my name was Teresa,

TN & ASSOCIATES	
<b>Founded:</b> 1989	<b>Roger Cupps, project team leader, Department of Transportation:</b>
<b>Full-time employment:</b> 54	
<b>Revenue:</b> 1995 cash flow of \$2 million	"She has given us a quality product, on-time with no hassle."
<b>Offices in:</b> Wauwatosa, Cincinnati and Oak Ridge, Tenn.	
<b>Projects:</b> 90% is government work; projects include Highway 59 in Milton, 43rd St. between Good Hope and Bradley Roads, Superfund sites. Also has been a contractor to Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, City of Milwaukee and County of Milwaukee.	

nobody ever returned my call. Now, at least half of them call back asking for Mr. Ni," said Ni, who has an 11-year-old daughter and 20-year-old son. "It's really a glass ceiling out there."

But, like any small business, she struggles with maintaining cash flow, recruiting talent and managing growth. The company has moved five times in the last seven years as it has outgrown its offices.

As a smaller firm, she may not recruit the people with the

most experience, but she says smaller companies are good places for eager junior-level people to hone their skills.

Sometimes, people will leave after getting that experience, but employees have a good opportunity to give their input at her firm.

For instance, the 401(k) plan was started after an employee's suggestion, and the company switched health care providers after another employee pointed out some of the benefits of an-

other company.

Michael Nittoli, who had been the company's bookkeeper and accountant for several years, left his CPA firm to join TN & Associates in January.

"Terry is a hands-on leader," said Nittoli, manager of corporate administration. "We have grown off the sweat of Terry Ni's brow. It is purely her will to do it."

She also enticed her husband of 20 years to join her firm after working as an environmental engineer at the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District for 11 years.

At first, Nick Ni did not want to put all of the family's financial future in one place.

"I said if I don't make it, with your experience, you could go with some other employer," Terry Ni said.

So Nick, who now is the company's chief operating officer, agreed and now says he has no qualms about having his wife as his boss.

"Without her business sense and leadership, we couldn't be here," he said.