

Strategies

OCTOBER 1, 1999

THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

PAGE 13

No niche too large

TN & Associates spurns specialization for a broad array of engineering services

By Brad Hoeschen

It seems like every entrepreneur is looking for a niche market, but Terry Ni doesn't buy it.

Ni, president of TN & Associates, Wauwatosa, never thought specialization was a good business philosophy. When she opened the firm by herself 10 years ago, she knew the only way to make a success of the business was to be a generalist.

As a civil engineer, Ni wanted a company with the ability to do project design, engineering, construction supervision—even build the project, if necessary. And she grew to understand that environmental engineering and cleanup would become an important part of diversification.

Anything less than providing every step in the engineering and design process would keep

TN & Associates from reaching its full potential and make it subordinate to much larger competitors, Ni said.

That broad-based philosophy has led to tremendous growth. TN & Associates is on target to reach \$24 million in revenue this year. That is a 60 percent increase from 1998. The firm doubled its revenue in each of the three previous years.

TN & Associates now has 180 employees in 10 states. If everything goes as planned, that number is expected to reach 500 in about three years. Ni expects revenue to grow in concert with employment.

"If we increase our employees by more than double, then our revenue had better increase by the same percentage," she said.

WHO'S WHO CLIENT LIST

Part of the reason for that growth is a client list that reads like a Who's Who of public agencies. In Wisconsin, The Department of Transportation and Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District are regular clients.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Defense and the Army Corps of Engineers have all used TN & Associates.

The growing number of federal contracts has pushed TN & Associates to diversify well beyond its suburban Milwaukee office.

"In this business, you have to use every advantage you can get."

— Terri Ni,
TN & Associates

Next to its 60 employees in Wisconsin, TN's largest office is in Oak Ridge, Tenn. That office does a lot of work for the U.S. Department of Energy because the agency has several facilities in the region.

TN & Associates recently opened its first international office in Okinawa, Japan. There the work is primarily with the U.S. Air Force, said Dave Voight, manager of the Milwaukee office.

"You have to go where the federal projects are located," Ni said. "There are not a lot of federal facilities in Wisconsin, so we have opened offices in places where there are large federal projects."

DISADVANTAGED NO LONGER

Ni and her staff make no apologies for using set-aside programs for women- and minority-owned businesses to get the company rolling and propel its growth. Many of the projects it bids on are available only to the companies with female or minority owners.

Others give preferences to those types of companies.

"In this business, you have to use every advantage you can get," Ni said. "It is very competitive, and there are many large companies. So we need to do whatever we can to get business."

Still, its rapid growth has gotten TN & Associates removed from one list. The company recently was taken off the state's disadvantaged business list, said Mike Spence, manager of engineering and technology for TN & Associates.

"We have always believed that our services needed to be competitive with the best companies, no matter what our classification," he said. "That has helped us prepare for a time when we would no longer have those advantages."

Classifications, like those for disadvantaged businesses, are designed to help companies grow and expand so that they are no longer disadvantaged,



JOHN ROBERTS

TN & ASSOCIATES

Terry Ni, 47 (front)

Title: President, TN & Associates

Family: Married with 2 children

Education: Ni has an undergraduate degree in applied science from National Taiwan University and a master's degree in environmental engineering from the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Experience: Ni worked as an environmental engineer with private firms in Wisconsin before striking out on her own.

said Tony Brown, contracts manager for TN & Associates.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

Its meteoric revenue growth, combined with a positive attitude about business development, has propelled TN & Associates onto the list of Future 50 companies. The designation by the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce and the Council of Small Business Executives recognizes the fastest growing businesses in the Milwaukee area.

As TN & Associates prepares for continued growth, Ni is careful to pay attention to all aspects of her business.

Although engineering and design is the firm's specialty, it wouldn't continue to grow if it ignored the operational part of its own business, she said.

TN & Associates recently created independent human resources and accounting departments, functions that were previously combined, with just a couple of staff people devoted to the work.

"If we do not have a complete company that can thoroughly handle every aspect of our business, we will not be able to meet the needs of our customers," Ni said. "It is all part of the cost of growing, and we are prepared to do whatever it takes."