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Chandler woman's 'green' business a hit

By Donna Hogan
For the Tribune



Debra Johnson, owner of Eco-Edge, stands on a front loader equipped with a catalyst combustion system, front left, at Salt River Materials Group near Mesa. July 8, 2009.

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Debra Johnson's company made more than a million dollars last year helping other companies make their trucks and industrial operations eco-friendly.

The Chandler entrepreneur is founder and chief executive officer of Eco-Edge, which helps businesses improve their environmental footprints and their bottom lines simultaneously with new technologies and procedures.

Eco-Edge was named Arizona Public Service's "2008 Sustainability Supplier of the Year," cementing Johnson's street cred among the environmentally conscious business bunch.

And the local businesswoman earned national recognition for making lots of money in a field often regarded as a tough sell.

"We have managed to combine both 'greens' - saving money and the environment - in a credible way," Johnson said.

Johnson, who founded Eco-Edge in 2002, is one of 27 U.S. women business owners recognized for overcoming the challenging economy to top the million-dollar milestone in 2008.

American Express OPEN, a division of the financial services giant that provides services to small businesses, and Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence, a nonprofit that provides resources for women entrepreneurs, launched a joint "Make Mine a Million \$ Business" initiative to help women-owned businesses achieve the milestone.

There are more than 10 million women-owned businesses in the country, but only about 2.6 percent report seven-digit annual revenue, according to the nonprofit.

"Building a million-dollar business is an extraordinary achievement in its own right, and it is even more impressive when you can accomplish it during the worst economy in two generations," said Neil Merlino, president of Count Me In. "These 27 gutsy and determined women seize opportunity when others see only challenges."

In fact, everything about Johnson's business has been a challenge, from launching a business that primarily focuses on truck fleets, heavy equipment and other stereotypically male-dominated business operations to, as Johnson puts it, "Being 'green' before 'green' was chic."

There's also "an inherent skepticism in the fleet industry about new technology," she said, fostered by a history of so-called technological advances that just didn't work or cost too much to make sense. "But that resistance caused us to raise the bar," she said.

Tenacity, willingness to try to understand each customer's unique needs, working technology and high standards helped her win over skeptics, she said.

And that also has built a foundation for future growth.

"It takes a long time for customers to develop trust, but then they get excited (about new technology)," she said.

Among the new believers is Dan McQuade, operations manager for Salt River Sand & Rock, a major construction business for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

McQuade said Eco-Edge provided him with a catalyst system that re-burns and reuses burnt fuel and a system that extends the life of oil by 300 percent to 500 percent for his heavy equipment.

But mostly, Eco-Edge provided him with "support, testing, monitoring and knowledge," he said.

"Part of our company's focus is to be as 'green' as we can and couple that with the economy and the need to save as much as we can," McQuade said.

Hiring Eco-Edge was a no-brainer for him since the Chandler company said it would take the pricey technology back if it didn't do both, he said.

Johnson said the staggering economy hasn't hurt her business, as customers and potential customers are looking for ways to save money and conserve energy to fuel their own recovery.

In fact, Johnson said she is preparing to launch a national expansion plan with a network of Eco-Edge dealers.

But she will keep the company's national headquarters in Chandler, "because I live near here."