

# **Boston Business Journal**

## **Appliqué Flag Maker Banks on Proactive Sales Approach, New Retail Opportunities to Regrow Revenue**

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The Singer sewing machines haven't been new for 30 years, but they're the beating heart of the operation.

The contraptions — gray and black workhorses, some of them with the gold “Singer” name nearly flecked all the way off — make jackhammer noises heard throughout the banner-festooned suite. The workers manning the machines meticulously trace patterns — eagle eyes, badge emblems, block letters. Then they snip around the stitches and add another layer. Then another, depending on the design of the banner and the colors it needs.



Hannah Tran works on an applique banner in Accent Banner's workroom in Medford. The labor-intensive project requires hours of layering fabric upon fabric, cutting and stitching.

“There’s too many steps!” quips Hannah Tran, who runs Accent Banner’s workroom. Tran has just traced out a design in blue wax and gets ready to pull a layer from the bolts of nylon stacked against the back wall. Against another wall is a work table draped with a banner that will hang from the rafters at Agganis Arena at Boston University, and next to that is a nearly completed banner for New England Law Boston. There’s one computer in the room, and it’s turned off.

“Sometimes I wonder if there’s any way I can make this place look more 21st-century,” says Alice Dietrich, surveying the room. “But, whatever works.”

Medford-based Accent Banner has held its own in the new economy by specializing in a decidedly old-economy area. It makes, distributes and installs flags, banners and signs that hang from hotel entrances, battleships and other places. It specializes in appliqué — the layering of fabric on fabric — and almost every inch of wall space is given over to the company’s handiwork: flags for the U.S. Navy, banners for clients ranging from local investment firms to Walt Disney Co.

Revenue grew to \$1.3 million last year from \$800,000 five years ago. The economy’s crash took some of the wind out of Accent Banner; Dietrich expects revenue for this year to be \$1.1 million. But the downturn prompted Dietrich to examine and rejigger Accent Banner’s sales approach, Web presence and product offerings, to the point where she has set a revenue goal of \$1.5 million for next year.

Appliqué isn't cheap. A single banner can cost thousands of dollars, depending on the size and the steps involved.

"People who do this are aware of the cost," said Dietrich, 58, owner and managing director of the company. "But they're also aware of the effect."

For example, people passing by the Boston Harbor Hotel rotunda will occasionally see a 30-foot-by-50-foot banner, the cost of which typically runs well into the five figures. The banners — all done by Accent Banner — advertise events ranging from the annual Boston Wine Festival, which the hotel hosts, to the annual Sail Boston event.

"They do a great job," said hotel general manager Paul Jacques.

Dietrich came to Accent Banner after a career in money management. Her husband, Curt Dietrich, bought The Flag Center in Cambridge in 1992 with personal finances and established it as Accent Banner. Over the years, the business experienced quite a bit of turnover in the business-management side, and Dietrich — who helped her husband with the books — took over the business five years ago, enabling her husband to specialize in sales.

"It's fun for me, coming out of the investment business into something like this, which is colorful — and tangible," Dietrich said.

But despite her familiarity with the company's books, she found that actually running the business was "another kettle of fish." She said she knew there were things she needed to learn about planning, pricing, efficiencies of scale and marketing.

One of the places she went to get a grounding was the StreetWise MBA program run by **InnerCity Entrepreneurs** in Boston. The nine-month certificate program is designed specifically for urban small businesses. As part of the program, each entrepreneur develops a three-year growth plan. Dietrich completed hers earlier this year.

Accent Banner's growth in recent years prompted the operation to move out of its cramped former digs to the 5,200 square feet it currently rents in an industrial office park on Rear Mystic Avenue in Medford. The plan was to buy the space and the adjoining suite, and expand the operation to 6,400 square feet, but the economic collapse threw a monkey wrench into those plans. The drop-off in Accent Banner's business in the fourth quarter alone last year was enough to make the company look like a shaky risk in the eyes of some bankers.

Dietrich still plans to buy the space and expand and is in talks with other banks and government agencies about securing funding for the purchase and expansion.

The downturn also prompted her to become proactive in drumming up new sales opportunities. Last October she hired a sales person who specializes in drumming up new business, and she plans to bring on a full-time sales manager next year. The business is expanding its retail offerings to include such things as appliquéd blankets and mufflers, available for sale on the company's Web site, which recently underwent a complete overhaul.

“When Wall Street happened, I knew it was big, and I knew it wasn’t going to be business as usual,” she said.

Jack Healy, director of the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, said it’s common for small manufacturers to venture into different product areas to keep the business viable. For many of these types of businesses, the down economy is an opportunity to innovate, he said.

“That’s how these guys make it. They keep scrambling,” Healy said. “That’s the essence of an entrepreneur.”

Accent Banner competes with a number of sign and banner makers, as well as graphic design firms.

Watertown-based New England Flag & Banner offers many of the same types of applique products Accent Banner does. But Dietrich said she is optimistic about the products her company makes and the services it offers, as well as the company’s ability to bounce back through the recent moves she’s initiated.

“I have a strong sense of the value of this business. People like this product,” Dietrich said. “Every once in a while (customers will) shop around, but they’ll come back. Not that we want to build in obsolescence, but we do in fact build a product that lasts.”