

How to build a bigger  small business

Upsize

Minnesota

June • July 2013 \$3.95 www.upsizemag.com

WHERE TO
TURN FOR
**HIGHER
BUSINESS**
ED

AVOID COSTLY
**PRICE
WARS**
— WITH A
STRATEGY

NEED A LOAN?
CONSIDER LENDER'S
PERSPECTIVE

BEWARE
WHEN CHECKING
**SOCIAL
NETWORK**
INFO

**WHO
CARES?**
IS KEY QUESTION
FOR LEADERS

HOW TO
STRIVE FOR
PERFECTION

"Everything I do I want to be perfect, and as you know and I know we don't live in a perfect world."

LYNMARIE WINNINGER,
president,
Ascendancy Research

COVER STORY

THE NEXT LEVEL

That's where
ASCENDANCY RESEARCH'S
owner is always heading,
but it's a challenge

PERFECTION IS THE GOAL for LynMarie Winninger, who bought three companies all told to build her market-research firm Ascendancy Research. After her first acquisitions, she dramatically changed everything about the look and feel because she wanted to wow her customers. "Any time people interact with Ascendancy Research or with LynMarie, I want it to be memorable," she says, and Upsize asked her to tell us how she aims for the impossible.

Interview by
BETH EWEN

Photography by
JONATHAN HANKIN



"I come from a hotel background, and my feeling is each of us is the concierge on the top floor, and anything that client wants or needs we are there to fulfill."

LYNMARIE WINNINGER,
Ascendancy Research

COVER STORY



“From one minute to the next you don’t know what you’re going to be learning.” — **LynMarie Winninger**, Ascendancy Research

Upsize: Describe your company as it stands today.

LynMarie Winninger: At Ascendancy Research, we are a vibrant, fun and growing organization that through our services and our unique environment bring answers to our clients’ marketing questions. We bring clarity to our clients about their customers’ needs and desires. We have 28 full-time and part-time employees.

Upsize: You started through acquisitions, I understand.

Winninger: Nine years ago, the kids were either in college or headed for college and I wanted to get back into the vibrant world of business. So we went on a journey trying to find what we could do out there. We looked at over 300 different companies over 24 months, and put some offers on some of them and none of them happened to come into fruition. And then these two research companies came up for sale at the

same time. We were looking at both of them, and put offers on both, and unfortunately we didn’t get either one. We thought, this wasn’t meant to be.

Lo and behold one of the new owners called us back and asked us if we’d be interested still in buying the company, and then another owner from the other research company two years later called and asked us if we were interested in buying the company. The companies found us, and that’s how we started.

Three years ago we acquired a third company, a market research company, that was quantitative in nature, where the other two were qualitative, so with the combination of all we have a balanced offering.

Upsize: Describe the difference.

Winninger: Qualitative is finding what people think and feel, what’s in their heart and mind. We do that mainly through focus groups, one on one interviews, or a shop-along. We listen to what the respondents are saying about a particular product or idea or a concept. It’s not quantifiable because it’s about their feelings and emotions. Where quantitative research is more statistical. You’re asked a question and you rate it on a scale of 1 to 5, like the color of a product. Then you tabulate all of those answers, and you can come up with a color that customers like most.

Upsize: What has the quantitative piece helped you to do?

Winninger: It has allowed us to more fully serve the customers we already have, depending on which kind of research they’re looking for. Qualitative research is our sweet spot. That’s what we love to do.

Upsize: Why?

Winninger: Because it’s face to face with the people, and you’re really researching in their hearts and minds what they’re thinking about the product. We do everything. One of our first research projects was Jessica Simpson hair extensions. This was when hair extensions first came on the market, and she was the first to offer them. We received this big shipment of hair extensions, and we had a group of women come in and try them. It’s just fascinating. We do everything from crazy things like that to what do you think of a political candidate to mock juries, where we’re pre-trying a trial and they’ll come in and say these are the facts and how do you hear them?

Upsize: I can hear that you love that aspect of it.

Winninger: Every day is different. All of us kind of say, our whole staff, we love being there and it’s hard to get us to go home. From one minute to the next you don’t know what you’re going to be learning. The one thing I enjoy the most, and it’s kind of my Achilles’ heel, also. I love to give people an enjoyable experience. Whether it’s the respondent coming in to give their opinion or whether it’s the client coming in, whatever I can do to facilitate that.

COVER STORY

Upsize: Why do you say that's your Achilles' heel?

Winner: Because I'm a perfectionist, so everything I do I want to be perfect, and as you know and I know we don't live in a perfect world. It's our mantra, it's part of our name. That's why I chose the name, because we're always working to ascend to the next level to give our clients the best experience possible.

It's innate in my nature. That's where boredom comes from if we don't constantly strive to be better. In everything that we do we should be motivated to be better in our own lives, and to be better for other people. So I'm striving all the time not only for my clients and respondents, but also for my employees. It's just part of who I am.

Upsize: Describe a turning point for your business, when you did something and business started moving in the right direction.

Winner: There's not any one huge thing, but along the way there were a number of little things. In purchasing the business, there were a lot of things that we went in and changed right away. Part of it was tangible: the things we saw we did a facelift scrub if you will, we created a more unique, uplifting environment. So many research facilities were built in the era of dark, heavy paneling, because the client is in the back room where it's dark, and they were built in the interior without outside windows and heavy furniture, a stable kind of environment.

I wanted to change all that, and that was different in that industry. I

moved to bright colors, light colors. That was a shock for clients, and our logo is bright red and bright blue. Comments we hear are, Wow there's so much energy here, it's fun to be here. We did that two times when we first bought the company and when we moved to our present location in 2009.

Upsize: How did you make the decision to change so boldly?

Winner: It was an interesting experience. We had to replicate what a market research facility looks like. You have to have a dark back room, and two-way mirrors, that's not something you can find in any building. We had lost our lease, and we had 30 days to do a complete renovation from the studs in the wall. I worked very closely with the architect and the contractors and they were just phenomenal and they made it happen in 30 days. On Friday we closed in one location, and moved in on Monday and all three rooms were booked.

It's like I said, it's just really fun because every day is different and fast-paced, and there's lots of energy

Upsize: Why do you think your customers reacted so well to what you did?

Winner: I think it's something innate in that I think people are always looking for change. When I walked into that facility before, I didn't necessarily want to be there. There was no joy, there was no,

Big solutions. Small wait.

Bremer bankers are big on individualized financial help. And they have access to big resources. Just as important, when you sit down with a Bremer banker, you're talking to someone who can set all the plans in motion, pronto. You won't have to wait long to see big things happen. So talk with a local Bremer banker. It could be the start of something big.

The big small bank.



Bremer.com
1-800-908-BANK (2265)

Member FDIC. © 2013 Bremer Financial Corporation. All rights reserved.

COVER STORY



“Do what you love. I put a lot of hours in and if it were drudgery that would be devastating to life all the way around.” — **LynMarie Winner**, Ascendancy Research

Gee, this is a fun place to be, there was no energy. I just went with my gut feeling, and I wanted a new name. It was called Research Systems, and I thought it was non-descriptive. That many years ago, technology was changing, and we were really just coming on the cusp of using technology as far as bringing the client and the customer together, so we updated all the technologies as well, including the audio-visual systems built into the conference rooms.

Upsize: What was the effect on the business?

Winner: It was all positive, and I was extremely surprised that it kept building upon itself and building upon itself. People who were previous clients at first were hesitant to come because they didn't know me and they knew everything was different. But when they did come they were elated and it was such a joy to hear their joy.

Upsize: So it paid off?

Winner: It snowballed actually, much better than I thought, I think

because of the level of service. It wasn't just the physical changes, but we worked very hard and still do today on the customer service they receive. For example, one client only drinks a certain soda; when she's in we have that soda.

I come from a hotel background, and my feeling is each of us is the concierge on the top floor, and anything that client wants or needs we are there to fulfill. If they need us to go clear across town and grab a dinner in a special restaurant, we do it. Last week we had a client come in and the DVD he was trying to use didn't copy well so I had to bring in my IT specialist and re-do his DVD. Whatever the client wants the client gets.

Upsize: Tell me more about how you developed your approach to business.

Winner: It kind of ties into my whole philosophy of ascending to the highest level and always working toward perfection. I used to be with the Hyatt Hotel Corp. and the Sheraton Hotel Corp. and then I managed a smaller, 150-room hotel as well. I learned through the hotel

COVER STORY

environment that customers are looking for an experience. Not only are they there to do whatever they're there for, whether it's to do research or have a meeting, they want to walk away and feel that was more than what it was supposed to be. So instead they walk away and say Wow, that was a good experience. I had a good time. That was a mantra at our hotels and it was a philosophy that I live by here in my home.

If someone is coming I want it to be memorable. Any time people interact with Ascendancy Research or with LynMarie, I want it to be memorable.

Upsize: It seems like that could be all-consuming, to keep striving for that perfect, memorable experience.

Winner: [laughs] You got me, Beth! You got me! Part of the reason why I do this and I can do this is because synergism creates synergism. I get my energy from what we do. As a matter of fact it's kind of prevalent throughout the organization. We all kind of laugh when it's the 3:00 hour, generally somebody will come and say, Wow, where did the day go? So 3:00 is our chocolate hunt time. We hit the halls and find our little delight of chocolate, so that's sustaining.

Upsize: What's your best advice for other business owners?

Winner: Do what you love. What gets you up in the morning, a friend of mine asked this question, aside from having to go to the bathroom. What gets you out of that bed? I put a lot of hours in and if it were drudgery that would be devastating to life all the way around.

Upsize: What's one thing "they" should have told you, about being an entrepreneur?

Winner: This was really a fun revelation and I had no idea this would be part of it. I thought I was buying an innate object, a business, but instead what I have discovered is it's an organic, living breathing entity.

The most positive thing about that is our people. I had no idea how responsible I would be for our people. We're very much a team, and beyond that the team calls themselves

family and to me that was the greatest compliment my staff could make.

I have come to understand what a responsibility I have not only to my clients and society for the services that we offer, but even equally important the responsibility I have for each of the people that works at Ascendancy Research, that not only do they have a means of making a living but they have purpose in their life and

we are there to be part of their life.

That was huge. It just totally was not part of what I thought of buying the business, that I was inheriting a family.

LynMarie Winner is president of **Ascendancy Research** in St. Louis Park: **952.544.6334**; **lwinner@ascendresearch.com**; **www.ascendresearch.com**

Get The Dirt Out

Clean Mailing Lists, Improve Image,
& Lower Costs.



We Launder Mailing Lists.



7669 Washington Ave. S. | Edina, MN | 55439

952.767.0300 | www.braemarmailing.com