

Arizona Daily Star

Estimated printed pages: 4

January 17, 2005

Section: BUSINESS

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Diverse business group needs to shape its identity

SMALL BUSINESS MAKEOVER / A local business counselor offers advice/////Profile* The business: Palo Verde Alvernon Business District, 748-9094.

* The members: Owners and representatives from area businesses.

* The challenge: Create a solid identity and mission for an organization serving more than 700 local businesses.

The consultant

Marie Miyashiro started Marie Reiko Communication in 1985. She is an accredited organization communication and development specialist with 23 years of experience in helping small businesses, corporate clients, nonprofits and government agencies in Tucson, across the United States and internationally. She can be reached through the Palo Verde Alvernon Business District at 748-9094 or by calling Pat Rogers at 327-6077, Ext. 105.

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When construction on the Veterans Memorial Overpass began in June 2004, nearby business owners questioned what they could do to help themselves and each other survive the difficult year ahead. In August, they decided the answer was the Palo Verde Alvernon Business District, a merchants association. Now six months later, the group is still defining what it is while trying to let other businesses know it exists.

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The story

The Palo Verde Alvernon Business District was having an identity crisis.

Formed in August in response to the closure of the Veterans Memorial Overpass earlier last summer, members hoped the association would become a rallying point for businesses affected by construction on the bridge.

Even after a few months, though, the group's purpose remained undefined. If the association focused only on the overpass, would it cease to exist once the bridge reopened?

For them to have any kind of lasting impact on the surrounding community, the member businesses needed to think beyond the bridge.

"We saw the needs of the group change. We got together for the bridge closure but got to thinking we could do more," said Amy Wilcox, general manager of the Holiday Inn Palo Verde, 4550 S. Palo Verde Road.

But figuring out how to define an association that serves more than 700 businesses was problematic.

The business district is roughly bordered by 22nd Street to the north, Irvington Road on the south, Davis Monthan Air Force Base and Golf Links Road on the southeast, Campbell Avenue and Kino Parkway on the west, and Columbus Boulevard on the east. Within this geographic area, businesses come in the form of retailers, manufacturers, wholesalers and many others in between.

"Diversity of the business in the district is across the board," said Keith Cooper, owner of AlphaGraphics and president of the

Palo Verde Alvernon group. "Part of our idea is to educate businesses and influence things that are happening in the community, such as future construction."

One project both the executive board and attending representatives did decide upon was the hiring of a consultant to work with businesses.

Even this, however, has been a challenge. The first consultant withdrew from the project, meaning members had to spend additional time interviewing for a new one.

Another was found, but it distracted members from developing the association's internal structure.

In the meantime, there was a drop in interest from business owners in the area that questioned whether the group would have any influence at all.

"There's not a lot of communication between the association and businesses right now," Cooper said.

That's something the group would like to eventually change, but first things first. Before members can decide how to market the group to area businesses, the group needs to formally develop its identity and mission.

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The advice

When she first met the group, consultant Marie Miyashiro was impressed with the commitment members had toward the business district.

"They had a lot of strategies and ideas, but they didn't have a common starting point," she said. "And they were frustrated, because they didn't know what was missing."

Without having a common purpose or identity to work from, the group had to rely on standards developed by other merchants associations.

"A lot of the frustration came in trying to duplicate the model of other groups," she said, citing the Campbell Avenue Business Partnership as one example.

But the unique diversity of the businesses in the Palo Verde Alvernon district made any attempts at exact duplication difficult. The models wouldn't fit.

Before meeting with Miyashiro, the district focused on membership numbers as the measurement of its success. Instead, Miyashiro suggested the group devise a different method - one that would complement its employee-contact program, which introduces employees in the area to the variety of business services available to them.

"It's not about focusing on increasing membership right away - although that's what they would like in the long term - but having conversations with employees about how businesses in the area can meet their needs," she said.

Using a process that combines research elements from both herself and business author Jim Collins, Miyashiro created a six-part "agenda" to help the association define its purpose and discover how to express it. At the root of any business strategy should be its identity.

"It's so important for any business or organization to ask who they are and who they want to be, before they ask what they want to do. It's like starting a career without knowing what you're passionate about," she said.

Once it clarifies its identity, Miyashiro said the association has five more basic business needs to define: its purpose, direction, structure, energy and expression. Expression is based upon the culmination of what the association has discovered about its goals and mission. It will eventually take the form of any marketing or advertising the association chooses to use.

"The Palo Verde Alvernon Business District identified what is important to them as the sense of community, and that's articulated in their purpose," she said, noting that its purpose is to serve as the voice of that community.

Now the group can work on developing a more formal structure and ways to reach out to businesses.

The employee-contact program is one method. Offering workshops is another - something she is currently helping the group to develop.

"I think their focus now that we've gone through the basic need is to continue to articulate their core values, get the right people involved in the association, and then focus on the other five needs," she said.

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We can help

Are you a small-business owner facing a challenge?

If so, the Star's Business section has an offer for you: Get some quality advice free by participating in "Small Business Makeover."

Each Monday, the Star matches a small business with an experienced business counselor who will discuss current challenges and suggest a course of action.

Volunteer entrepreneurs must agree to talk frankly about their business issues with assigned counselors and not mind going public with that information. In return, the adviser will develop a specific plan to address challenges and help small businesses move to the next level. The counselors are experienced, professional advice-givers gathered from Tucson's rich community of nonprofit and for-profit business counselors.

If you would like to be the subject of an upcoming makeover, contact Tiana Velez at 434-4083 or tvelez@azstarnet.com.

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