



BY LEE ROSS | SPECIAL TO NMBW

## DJ HECKES

# The display diva

*"I'm interested in the community and I want to know how I can help."*

#### Current position:

Owner, EXHIB-IT! Tradeshow Marketing Experts

#### Education:

Associate's degree in Pre-law, Coastal Carolina College; Bachelor's degree in health care administration, University of Southern Illinois

#### Previous jobs:

Exhibit Design Consultants Inc.; Dines, Wilson & Gross law firm; Stanfield & Warner law firm

#### Kudos:

Maxie Anderson Award for Entrepreneur of the Year in 2005; awards for overall excellence in leadership, chapter management and leadership and member recruitment/retention while president of the American Marketing Association's New Mexico chapter

#### Community involvement:

Active in six chambers in New Mexico and Texas; Crime Stoppers; Albuquerque Economic Development; Rio Rancho Chamber of Commerce and Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce; National Association of Women Business Owners; American Marketing Association past president; Give-a-Book

Many of us have hectic schedules, but DJ Heckes' "to do" list will make you wonder when she has time to sleep.

Born and raised in North Carolina, Heckes is the owner of a multi-million dollar trade-show marketing company, EXHIB-IT! Tradeshow Marketing Experts, which is among the top 50 largest women-owned businesses in New Mexico. Heckes also won the Maxie Anderson Award for Entrepreneur of the Year in 2005 and her company is one of the fastest growing businesses in Albuquerque based on revenue and employee growth, according to the New Mexico Business Weekly's 2006 Fast Trackers list. The company has grown more than 100 percent in the last two years. Last year its growth was at 39.6 percent and she expects about 70 percent growth for this year.

"You think we were on Fast Trackers last year?" she says. "We're going to be up high this year."

Heckes says to achieve success she has worked to make herself and her employees tradeshow experts. Her business can design, produce, install, store and market everything for a client to get noticed at tradeshow. In fact, Heckes has 12 clients for whom she runs turnkey operations, for whom EXHIB-IT! takes care of the entire tradeshow plan, and even sets up the displays and selects the booth space. All the client has to do is show up. Last month the firm closed an \$80,000 deal with a company in Santa Fe.

"We're a solution seller and we sell in accordance with the client's budget," says Heckes. "We also have economical exhibits for state, local and startup businesses and we have custom exhibits."

Outside of work, Heckes has found time to pilot a hot air balloon, volunteer for Crime Stoppers, and launch a magazine. She is an ambassador for Albuquerque Economic Development, the Rio Rancho Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce,

and she even started a think tank group through the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) for New Mexico's highest grossing women business owners. She is a past president of NAWBO's New Mexico chapter and was president of the New Mexico chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA) in 2005.

During her tenure, AMA New Mexico received numerous awards, including overall excellence in leadership and recognition for Heckes' management, member retention and recruitment. In fact, no chapter has ever won more Chapter Excellence Awards in a single competition than AMA New Mexico's 2005 tally.

Stephanie Flanagan, an employee at EXHIB-IT!, says working for such an active and involved boss is challenging. Flanagan, who describes herself as Heckes' "right hand," says she has been involved in some way with every one of Heckes' projects.

"She expects a lot, but she gives a lot in return," says Flanagan. "I've never had a boss who cared so much about her staff and tries to develop them professionally and personally."

One of Flanagan's jobs is to go to trade shows to find business leads. Flanagan says Heckes has her communicate with possible clients using a model of four business personalities: the eagle, the dove, the peacock and the owl. Heckes took these ideas from a seminar put on by Todd Novak of the Novak Group.

"Within probably the first 30 seconds of speaking to someone, you can determine how to communicate with them," says Flanagan. Knowing how to approach each of these personalities is a big key to successful marketing, she says.

Along with the strange task of finding people's bird types, another odd job Heckes asked Flanagan to do was make a phone call to actor Dennis Hopper to set up an interview for a book Heckes is working on about ex-New Mexico State lawmaker Odis Echols Jr.

"She shares her time with a lot of community projects," says Diane Furie, an event and meeting planner who has known Heckes for eight years. "I would say (it's) out of the goodness of her heart, and she's a very savvy business woman, and she always conducts herself with an air of professionalism."

Furie says Heckes is vivacious, is will-

ing to share her business strategies with others, and has a knack for planning things out. Furie runs a project called the Celebration of Excellent Women. While most people wait until a few days before the September event, Furie says Heckes reserved a booth and signed up to be a sponsor about a month ago.

"She is a good friend, and not just when she needs something," says Furie, who recently came back from a stay at the hospital. She says that Heckes regularly checked in on her. "That's the true test of a friend, I think."

Edna Lopez, owner of Compa Industries Inc., says she appreciates that Heckes' Web site lists information on events for the small business community, including events geared to Hispanic- and women-owned businesses.

"She's just very diligent and works with the community," Lopez says.

Lopez does government contracting and needs people with security clearance.

"Every time they have the job fair at Kirtland, because she knows I always look for cleared people, she makes sure that I'm in there, at the trade fair."

A nationally certified paralegal, Heckes had a 15-year legal background prior to starting EXHIB-IT!

"I'm fascinated with supporting the law," says Heckes. "I'm interested in the community and I want to know how I can help... That's why I'm also interested in Crime Stoppers."

She volunteered to help out with the Crime Stoppers international conference, which was held in New Mexico last October. Her company did the exhibitor layout, helped organize the conference, and even helped find sponsors for the show. Heckes is serving on the New Mexico Crime Stoppers board.

She is also working toward launching a nonprofit magazine to support the Give-a-Book organization, which makes books available to children. Even with the great variety of activities in which she is involved, Heckes says she has two skills that she draws on most.

"I hope to be able to help grow New Mexico, so even though I'm involved in a lot of things, in each thing I do I always help with marketing efforts to help that organization," says Heckes. "It's my marketing and legal background, that's what I attribute to everything that I do."