

# Enterprise



[ MAKING IT ]

## SELLING THE BRAND

A willingness to adapt helps an embroidery designer expand beyond uniforms

When UPS needed someone to make reusable vinyl bags to sort small goods in its hubs three years ago, the conglomerate didn't go to one of its large suppliers to handle the job. Instead, it zeroed in on Prestige Design Group Inc., a 16-employee Atlanta firm that specializes in embroidered apparel. UPS developed a strategic alliance with the company and then helped it build a manufacturing operation from the ground up.

"Prestige had been calling on UPS for several years without success, and we knew that we wanted to align with [the company] in a way that went beyond just uniform embroidery," says Lenny Clark, UPS' corporate supplier diversity coordinator. "So UPS introduced Prestige to Riverside Manufacturing of Atlanta [a UPS supplier], and they were able to provide us with the vinyl bags. It became a win-win for all three."

At the heart of the Prestige-Riverside partnership is Elayne Leathers-Hill, 57, Prestige's founder and CEO. A lifelong embroidery enthusiast who racked up several years of sales experience working for companies like Mary Kay, Leathers-Hill started her firm in 1991. "I was over 40 at the time, and I knew that my time in the marketplace was limited," says Leathers-Hill. "I looked at my natural abilities, and decided on embroidery."

With a \$30,000 investment from her husband, Leathers-Hill purchased a one-head embroidery machine and began working from home. She soon realized that the machine couldn't handle the work flow that was needed for her to reach her financial goals, so she added 1,250 square feet of space to her home to make room for a four-head and later a 12-head machine.

With just over \$7 million in sales in 2004, Prestige is still based in Leathers-Hill's Atlanta home, while the vinyl bag manufacturing plant is in Moultrie, Georgia. The company's primary business is full-service computerized embroidery design, uniforms, and corporate apparel. Some of its clients include Coca-Cola, Bronner Brothers, Cobb County Transit, and Gwinett County Transit Authority.

LEATHERS-HILL CHANGED HER SALES STRATEGY TO ADD MORE CUSTOMERS TO HER CLIENT ROSTER.

Rather than focusing on the physical uniforms and apparel, Leathers-Hill and her sales team pushed the branding aspect of Prestige's products. "I wasn't getting the numbers that I wanted, so four years ago I changed my strategy and started selling the brand rather than the embroidery," says Leathers-Hill. In 2005, she plans to finesse the pitch even further and add more sales representatives to her team as well as several large customers to her client roster.

With the help of UPS and Riverside Manufacturing, Leathers-Hill's major breakthrough came in 2001 when she added manufacturing to her firm's repertoire. To ensure a smooth transition, she says UPS not only supported the operational setup but also provided executive education at the Kellogg School of Management, where the Prestige team brushed up on basic concepts such as how to pore over balance sheets and manage the firm's finances.

The efforts paid off for Prestige, which in 2004, won the National Minority Supplier Development Council's National Supplier of the Year award after being selected from a national pool of 16,000 minority-owned firms.

George Lottier, president of the Atlanta-based Georgia Minority Supplier Development Council, says Prestige's recognition is well deserved. "Elayne is a very creative, resourceful individual who has gotten into products that minorities haven't historically participated in," says Lottier, who worked with Leathers-Hill and UPS to help cement the two firms' supplier-customer relationship. "A willingness to adapt and change processes is what has gotten her to where she is today, and it will carry her well into the future."

—Bridget McCrea

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