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Friday, September 10, 2010

Growth Strategies

NASA subcontractor J&P Technology boldly seeks out new industry opportunities

Launching in a new direction

Houston Business Journal - by [Tanya Rutledge](#) Special to Houston Business Journal

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For the past 13 years, Jennifer Lewis has been dealing with issues that crop up when a company is growing by leaps and bounds. But these days, she is learning to adapt in more difficult times.

Lewis' company, [J&P Technologies](#), provides system engineering and development as a subcontractor for [NASA](#). But as the federal government stands poised to cut some of NASA's major space programs, Lewis is scrambling to diversify her company away from being dependent on NASA work, which has been J&P's bread and butter since the company's founding in 1997.



Craig Hartley/HBJ
 J&P Technologies' Jennifer Lewis: Steering the company away from NASA contracts and toward biomedical, oil and gas and other types of commercial space work.

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"We have had no backward movement as a company so far, but everyone is on edge with the new direction that the government is taking with NASA," Lewis says. "I am working very hard to diversify, but that is easier said than done."

With 30 employees that currently service two major NASA contracts, J&P employs engineers in every facet of the industry, including chemical engineers, mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, aerospace engineers and computer science experts. Lewis plans to market the company's expertise outside of the NASA bubble and apply it to other industries such as biomedical, oil and gas and other commercial space work.

As part of that effort, she recently joined the [Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership](#) and has been attending non-industry-specific networking events in an effort to move her company to other arenas.

"I'm looking at all kinds of alternatives and trying to be proactive and not just waiting to see what will happen with NASA," Lewis says. "I am teaching myself different ways to

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break into other industries.”

nothing but growth

Pounding the pavement for contracts is something new for Lewis, who ran J&P as a one-woman shop for several years before adding her first employee in 2002 after landing a large NASA contract.

From there, J&P saw nothing but growth, expanding from two employees to nine virtually overnight after winning another NASA contract in 2006. Another 16 employees came on board in 2009 when the company teamed up with [Lockheed Martin Corp.](#) to secure another major NASA project.

Lewis, who started her career as a programmer for other NASA subcontractors before launching J&P shortly after the birth of her first child, says despite the major growth spurts, she always did her homework before adding new employees to her roster.

For example, before going from two to nine employees, she met with an insurance broker to help her set up a benefits plan. And she brought the employees into the discussion.

“I completely made them part of the decision-making process, showing them the different options for coverage and asking their opinions on what they thought was best,” Lewis says. “After that, they completely relaxed.”

Lewis’ insurance agent, Corey Magliolo, executive director of Dickinson-based insurance agency [Maxim Group](#), says her decision to include the employees so heavily in the process was a very unique approach, especially for a company of J&P’s size at the time.

“It was to the point where she involved the employees so much that I was not used to it,” Magliolo says. “But it was important to her and she stuck with it, and it has worked out well.”

Lewis believes that leaning on outside experts for help has saved her from making mistakes as the company has grown, whether it was seeking advice on insurance or finance or any other aspect of running a business.

“You’ve got to use those resources that are out there, and I’ve always been willing to do that,” Lewis says.

SOUGHT FEEDBACK

Lewis also sought feedback when it came to setting up a system for determining pricing for NASA contract bids, which she quickly learned was a more intricate process than when she was simply bidding out her own time as an individual consultant.

She approached the [University of Houston](#) Small Business Development Center, which paired her with a business expert who helped her create tables to determine her budgets and rates for contracts.

“That help was invaluable because if you don’t set up your rates correctly and include every single aspect of your time and materials, you can end up losing money on a contract,” Lewis says. “There were all kinds of unexpected expenses that they told me to include that I never would have thought of.”

Lewis, who still uses the system that she learned from UH when bidding out contracts today, also sought out small-business resources when securing a loan to expand the company’s employee base.

For the first few years, she was working out of her home, but when it came time to hire more employees to service the new contracts, Lewis wanted to move the company into traditional office space near NASA in Clear Lake. So she turned to the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#) for help.

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Lewis, who is Native American, had spent lots of time during the first few years of the company's life earning certifications as a woman-owned business and a small disadvantaged business under the SBA's 8(a) program. In addition to qualifying J&P for certain government contracts, those certifications also helped her land a \$100,000 loan from the SBA, which she used to fund payroll for the new employees until she was paid for the first part of the NASA contract.



Craig Hartley/HBJ
 J&P Technologies' Jennifer Lewis: Steering the company away from NASA contracts and toward biomedical, oil and gas and other types of commercial space work.

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Lewis quickly paid back the loan, but another growth spurt sent her in search of a traditional bank line of credit, which she secured for \$200,000.

Lewis used \$100,000 of that line during one of the company's expansions, but has since paid that back as well, making J&P debt-free.

"I learned early on to lay all your cash flow out so you know where every penny is going," she says.

And J&P's revenue stream has benefitted from that approach. The company generated \$4.21 million in revenue in 2009, up from \$2.47 million in 2008. J&P is currently teamed with **Science Applications International Corp.**, on the **Johnson Space Center's** NASA safety and mission assurance support services contract and with Lockheed Martin on JSC's NASA facility development and operations contract.

Lewis says although neither contract stands to be cut altogether, she is anticipating eventual staff reductions unless Washington changes its much-debated plan for cutbacks at NASA — or unless she can diversify J&P's contract base quickly.

"Aerospace has always been an up-and-down industry, but usually as one phase is closing

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down, there is another one opening up," she says. "That's just not the case anymore, so all the contractors are looking at alternatives now and trying to hold on until things calm down. It's just part of doing business."



J&P Technologies

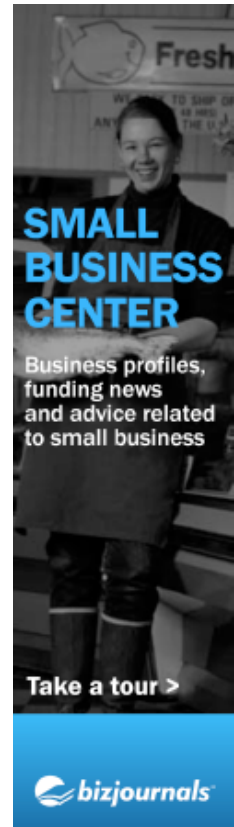
BUSINESS: Provides complex system engineering, development and support. Currently servicing two major NASA contracts.
FOUNDED: 1997
OWNER: Jennifer Lewis
EMPLOYEES: 30
2008 REVENUE: \$2.47 million
2009 REVENUE: \$4.21 million
WEB SITE: www.jandptech.com

TANYA RUTLEDGE is a Houston-based freelance writer.

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