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## **Small and attentive wins notice**

**Debbie Nelson's marketing and special events agency reigns as Greenville Chamber's top small business**

**By Jenny Munro**

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This has been a big year for Debbie Nelson and Associates, as the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce named the three-person firm its Small Business of the Year and it moved into a new home.

"It's a nice seal of approval," Debbie Nelson, president and owner of the full-service marketing, public relations and special events firm, said of the award. "Internally, that was exciting."

Besides the validation, the award has made potential clients aware of the firm and has driven people to its Web site, which has built her brand, she said.

Nelson said buying and moving to a downtown house, built around 1916 to 1918, was an act of love.

"I love downtown buildings and old historic houses," she said. "I thought it might be neat to be downtown."

Her firm takes up the majority of the space, but she has two small tenants. Nelson also owns her former building and leases it out.

In addition, DNA has added eight additional clients to its roster. It has grown from 10 client accounts in 2001 to 35 client accounts this year, she said. Although some clients drop out as she gains new ones, the trajectory has been upward for the past six years.

The firm's five-year goal is to have "the same growth pattern" it has experienced since its formation in 1997.

"We measure our success by the success of our clients and their satisfaction with our services" rather than by the number or size of accounts, she said in a presentation for the Small Business of the Year Award.

The three-person firm plus interns expects to add another account manager within the year, she said. An eventual goal is to have a graphics function in-house. Currently, she out-sources that part of her work to free-lance artists.

In 2005, she purchased Socoh Marketing when Brad Majors, its owner, became marketing director at Greenville Technical College. The acquisition, with a client base including Commercial Bank in Carrollton, Ga., allowed the company to expand beyond South Carolina's borders.

However, neither Nelson nor her employees want to see the firm grow too fast or too big, they said.

Clemson University graduate Dana Morgan, an account executive who has been with Nelson for more than four years, said joining a small firm is probably what kept her in the marketing-public relations business after an internship with a large agency.

"I was in the basement doing the same project every single day," she said of her nine-month unpaid internship. "No one took the time to get to know you. I saw the dynamics of the large agency. I was reconsidering everything before I met Debbie."

"We are small, but we're full-service," Nelson said.

Morgan, who works closely with the firm's interns, said relationships are what make the firm work.

"We all work together. Every one of us knows what's going on with the other person's clients. From the bottom to the top, we can do it. We could clean the bathroom to copyrighting material," she said.

And interns are involved in all the projects, she said

Debbie Nelson and Associates has built its business through creating and adding niches that it can fill, the founder said.

Nelson began the business as a special events company, working part time out of her house. Her first real client was the Greenville Humane Society.

One of her success stories with that organization was the Best Friends Photo Contest, a fundraiser for the society. In 2005, the contest generated nearly 900 entries and raised more than \$5,000. Entries are displayed at Haywood Mall in October, attracting the notice of tens of thousands of shoppers.

She attributes part of her decision to go into business for herself to the Greenville Leadership class she took in 1996.

"I really wanted to get back to working," she said. Once she founded the firm, "it kind of blossomed and grew. My next client was Western Carolina Sewer Authority. I started developing a niche" for area water and sewer public utilities. The authority had no need for advertising, but it did need a customer information program.

Although she knew nothing about sewers, she learned of the potential client through a Greenville Leadership classmate who worked there.

"It's not glamorous, but it's important," she said of her utility clients.

Ray Orvin, Western Carolina executive director, said, "She is very good at what she does. She's taken the time and energy to understand our business. She's able to pick that up quickly."

Western Carolina's product is actually the protection of the environment, he said, and Nelson is "good about explaining our different functions. We use her a lot as an interface with partners. She does extremely well. If we want her, she's here."

DNA has had fun with the work. The firm developed Freshwater Freddie, a frog that is Western Carolina's mascot. Actually, a first-grade class at Hollis Elementary School won a contest to name the frog.

"We thought about turtles," she said, "but they're a little slow. Frogs are active."

A blog for Freshwater Freddy, giving tips on protecting the water, is expected to launch Jan. 13, the same time Western Carolina is launching a grease campaign with Roper Mountain Science Center, Nelson said.

In addition, the firm created and maintains Western Carolina's Web site, [www.wcrsa.org](http://www.wcrsa.org).

The Web site is interactive because "we'd like a lot more feedback from the community," Orvin said.

Debbie Nelson & Associates works with a number of utilities, Nelson said, most of them water or sewer.

Meghan Spigner, a University of South Carolina graduate and a public relations specialist who has been with the firm for more than a year, said she enjoys working with the University Center of Greenville, a project that began about the same time she joined Nelson.

"It's been a big project," she said, and one that is important to the community.

Many of DNA's customers are entrepreneurs starting new businesses, Nelson said.

"They don't have a lot of money. We try to be real cost-effective," she said. "They're gaining a relationship. You get the knowledge that the person in overall charge really knows your accounts."

**Caption:**GEORGE GARDNER/Staff

Personal attention: Debbie Nelson, left, works with Meghan Spigner, one of the agency's two staffers. "We are small, but we're full-service," Nelson says.

GEORGE GARDNER/Staff

New digs: Debbie Nelson recently moved her marketing agency into new quarters -- a circa 1916 house at 103 E. Park St., just north of downtown Greenville.