

# Managing projects, not people:

Some entrepreneurs work harder to maintain their small companies

**T**he world knows the story of how Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak started Apple Computer Inc.

in a garage. Their work paid off and their company went public and then they were out of the garage and wearing suits and going up and down in elevators and attending board meetings. That's success. But to some, the real charm lies with the two guys in the garage.

There are entrepreneurs who have a taste for the small and unpretentious. They start small companies and intend to keep them small — provided they can make enough money.

There are no statistics on such entrepreneurs, but there seem to be plenty of them out there. They cite a simpler lifestyle, independence, control of their destiny and freedom from managing people as the rewards for running bantam-weight businesses.

## Small and prosperous?

But can they stay small and bring in sufficient dollars?

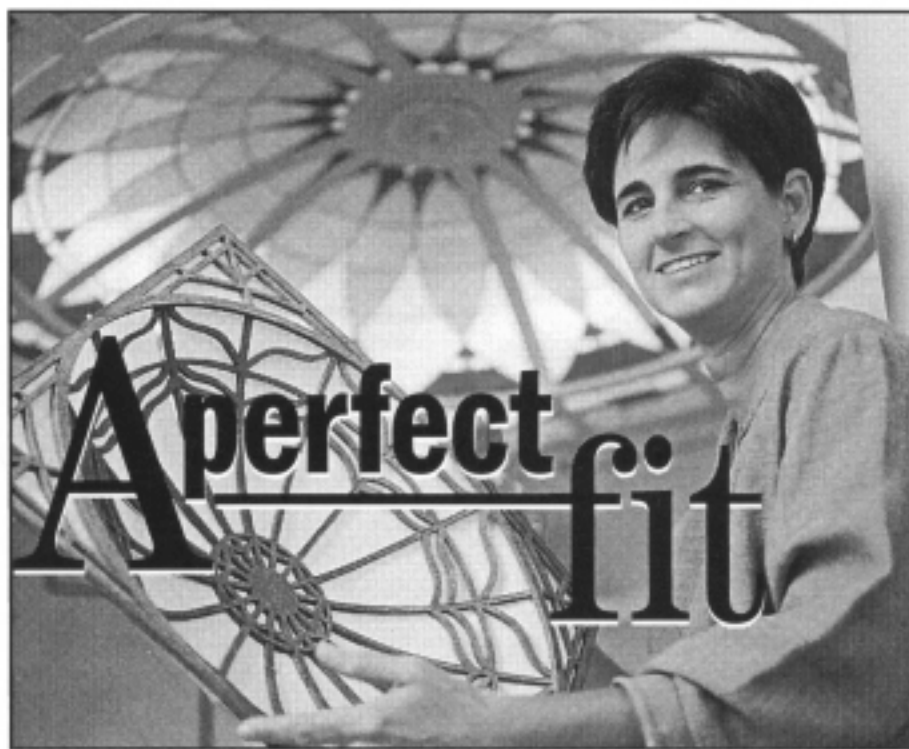
Carin Wolfe would say yes. Her 9-year-old company, Xpress Memory Inc., is so tiny it barely exists. Yet last year, Wolfe said she did \$800,000 in sales.

Wolfe sells computer memory out of an office in her Roswell home. She generally operates with one assistant. Her elderly father, Edward Wolfe, helps out.

"Being small, I can focus more on service," Wolfe said. "It's difficult for a customer to deal with a big company when there's a problem. Somebody told me a long time ago, a customer won't remember a problem, but they'll remember how you handled it."

Wolfe, a former banker, sells memory chips for major computer brands and modems and hard drives for laptops. Perhaps a key to her success as owner of a small company is that she sells a manufactured product that is shipped to customers, but she neither manufactures nor ships.

Customers — both corporate and individual — order by phone or through the firm's Web site, and Wolfe faxes the orders to two California suppliers, who ship



JOANN VITELLI

**Smaller is better:** Business owners like Angelique Jackson reap the benefits of staying small.

to the customers.

When she started Xpress Memory, one of her ambitions was to buy a house, which she did in 1994.

"I never wanted to live paycheck to paycheck again, and I didn't want to manage people," Wolfe said. "I guess what I really like best is the independence. But to do this, you need to find a niche market and emphasize service."



Sellers

Jeanne Sellers, a volunteer counselor with the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) for the U.S. Small Business Administration, cautioned: It's very difficult to succeed and remain small.

She herself started a transcription service in 1976, built it into an international firm and sold it two years ago for several million dollars. "There has to be growth potential or that business won't succeed in the future," she said.

"There are so many things that can happen to a small

business that stays small. Something may happen to the person who runs it, and there's nobody to fill in," Sellers said. "Or a competitor comes into the picture who is more sophisticated and takes business away."

## Financial, not physical, growth

But many entrepreneurs who believe smaller is better aren't deterred by the difficulties.



Kraus

Kevin Kraus, for example, is a financial planner who left a large company last November to go out on his own.

He is determined his Compass Financial Consulting will never grow to more than five people, "if that." At present he is a one-man operation subleasing space from an attorney's group in Alpharetta.

He said he admires the company he

left, but wasn't comfortable with its procedures.

"The objective was to grow the business, grow the people under you and pass your clients down to them," Kraus said. "I had several clients that I was probably their third or fourth client manager in five years."

He said now he spends his time advising clients on wealth management rather than training and managing other people, and that's the way he wants it.

"I wanted to develop a business of clients that I enjoyed, personally as well as professionally," Kraus said. "I felt like I could provide the service and see them develop and attain their goals."

"With some of them, it may take 30 years, but I'm young enough that I can do that," he added. "I've told several clients who have come with me from the other firm that I want to grow old with my clients."

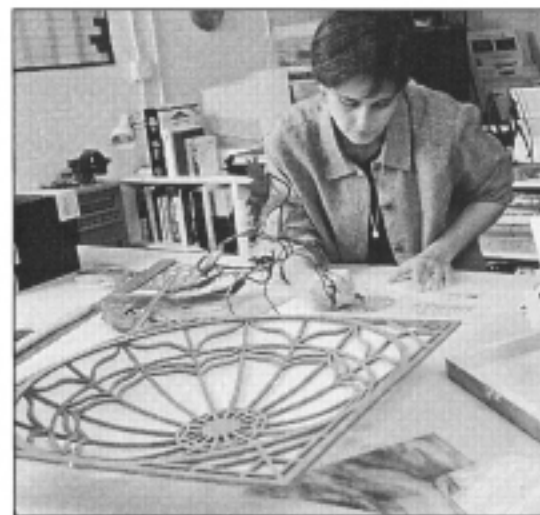
Kraus and his wife, Sue, saved up so he could make the move. He said his revenue goal for the first year is \$125,000. He agrees with Carin Wolfe that a small firm can give better service than a large one, and he is confident he can compete with "the Merrill Lynchs of this world."

Another entrepreneur, Angelique Jackson, has an artistic talent: She designs curved stained-glass domes for ceilings. She also sells the domes and oversees their tricky installation around the world.

In each of the past two years, her company, Jancik Arts International, has grossed more than \$600,000. She runs this operation from a small office in Decatur with one assistant, Robin Brown.

## Manage projects, not people

"With a small company, a decision can be made and then followed through and it's realized so much quicker [than in a big organization]," Jackson said.



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## Big profits, tiny staff:

Jackson, owner of Jancik Arts International, has one supercompetent employee who handles, as Jackson put it, the work of three less-competent people.

"I'm a very impatient person and I might make the wrong decision, but I will take the consequences of it. Believe me, the more you grow, the more it becomes administrative," she said. "I like being small probably because I enjoy managing projects over managing people."

With about \$5,000 in start-up capital, Jackson and a partner, Jo Ann Jancik, launched the business in Atlanta in 1979. The two moved to Ocala, Fla., to take advantage of a lower cost of living. They started by selling flat stained glass at sidewalk art shows before moving on to the more difficult — and lucrative — curved domes.

Jackson returned to Atlanta six years ago when Jancik decided to leave the business. She has placed her colorful domes with Disney World, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, Princess Cruises, temples of the Latter-Day Saints, and some homes. The average price for a commercial dome is about \$100,000 and for a residential dome, it is \$60,000.

Jackson said she would advise anyone who wants to have a small, successful business to specialize. And, instead of hiring lots of people, hire one who is supercompetent.

"Hire somebody like Robin, who is far more capable on the administrative side," she said. "It would probably take three people less competent than Robin to handle what she does. I pay more for one really good person because, again, I don't want to manage people."

Sellers, the SCORE counselor, conceded that, though difficult, it is possible to prosper as a small company.

"The owners have to be as wise as they can be to stay as small as they want to be and still make a success," she said. "It can happen. You have to know your client base, keep your clients happy, know what they're thinking. Keep marketing just like a big company." □