



In the News

Sandra Steen & Associates, Inc.

Consultant Offers Diversity Training

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Sandra Steen knows what corporate America needs.

For almost seven years, her business, Sandra Steen and Associates Inc., has consulted with large companies on dozens of issues, from improving morale to productivity. Mainly through her spirited seminars, Steen teaches companies like Wal-Mart and Highlights for Children how to motivate their employees. Perhaps most importantly though, she has turned her attention to teaching the importance of diversity in a corporate structure.

"I think the real reason we are doing more diversity courses is the need for a more cohesive work force," she said.

Steen knows a thing or two about the importance of diversity. Growing up on the East Side, she saw her grandmother held back in life because she was black and a woman.

"Being with Grandmother was always a defining experience because I heard her talking about opportunities she was denied," Steen said.

All the same, her grandmother ran a relatively successful beauty shop and chased the entrepreneurial spirit as far as it would take her. Some of that spirit must have rubbed off on Steen. She was an achiever in high school and when it came time for college, she picked Southern Methodist University.

"It had a little bit of a competitive edge," she said of SMU. "It was out of my reach financially, and it gave me the opportunity to be in the day-to-day flow of people with great resonance." Scholarships, grants, loans and "everything I could get my hands on" helped Steen pay for SMU. After college, Steen worked as a manager at several large companies, including West Telemarketing Corp., where she became an expert on call centers.

While Steen was successful quickly in her career, the work was not quite satisfying. She wanted to strike out on her own. So she left the comfort of a corporate paycheck, and on the back porch of her aunt's house set up a small office and began to find her dream.

Soon, Sandra Steen & Associates was born.

Today, the company has several six-figure contracts and an office high in the Tetco Building on Loop 410. Steen has seven full-time employees and 25 speakers on contract. The road to success has been anything but easy, Steen said, and past difficulties help her focus on bringing the message of diversity to the corporate world.

"If both of us are identical, then one of us is unnecessary," she tells her clients. Of course, she qualifies, all people are different in their own way, but the message gets across — diversity strengthens a company in the long run. "What's still wrong with us is fear. We still fear what is different," she said.

Steen's work has touched several high-level corporate managers. Patricia Mikelson, the granddaughter of the original founder of Highlights for Children and now the president and chief executive officer of Highlights-Jigsaw, said having Steen motivate her employees was a boon to the company. "She talks to the individual," Mikelson said. "It doesn't matter what your background is because she is communicating with the very human elements that drive people."

Back in San Antonio, Kimberly Woodson, the senior consultant for disability operations at SBC Communications, agrees. "What she was getting through to our folks is that your tone and your attitude come through to people," Woodson said.

Steen views her work as a realization of a lifelong dream to change people's hearts through speaking. "Inspiring people, teaching and imparting knowledge — it always went back to my passion, and I decided to go for it," she said.