

At the top of their game: competent and creative, these entrepreneurs are small businesses' elite

Black Enterprise, May 2004

Many say small business is the backbone of the U.S. economy. According to the Small Business Administration, these operations collectively employ more than half of all private sector employees, pay 44.5% of total U.S. private payroll and generate 60% to 80% of net new jobs annually.

Each year, BLACK ENTERPRISE honors the leading small businesses and the visionaries who drive them with the BE Small Business Awards. The winners will be announced at the ninth annual Black Enterprise/General Motors Entrepreneurs Conference, May 12-16, at the Wyndham Anatole hotel in Dallas.

EMERGING COMPANY OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

This award recognizes businesses that have poised themselves for future growth by carving out a special business niche or by adopting creative marketing techniques.

ZKD Inc.

TYPE OF BUSINESS Staffing solutions, security management, language services

PRESIDENT/CEO Zachary K. Duck

LOCATION Arlington, VA

Everyone knows the saying "Jack of all trades, master of none." That could be the outcome of wearing too many professional hats. But ZKD Inc. is an exception with its multiservice approach.

As a staffing agency, ZKD analyzes current labor market trends and matches qualified applicants with employment opportunities. After 9-11, the company doubled its efforts to provide security services to meet increased demand. ZKD also offers a comprehensive communications service.

Founded in 2001 with only two employees, the company has had solid growth. There are now more than 250 employees and revenues totaled more than \$10 million in 2003. ZKD has a growing roster of clients, including the Transportation Security Administration and McNeil technologies. In January, ZKD was awarded a five-year, \$53.7 million contract from the Department of Defense. In addition, the company has already solidified \$34.5 million in contracts for 2004 with another \$13 million expected.

Integrated Resource Technologies Inc.

TYPE OF BUSINESS Management consulting

PRESIDENT/CEO Faye Fields

LOCATION Falls Church, VA

The company's corporate motto is "Innovative Solutions--Excellent Results," and that's exactly what this firm gets every time. What else would you expect from a company that guarantees its services?

Founded in 1986, IRT has more than 100 employees, 19 locations nationwide, and is 8(a) certified, serving federal, commercial, and nonprofit clients. The company can count the Missile Defense Agency, the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the U.S. Marine Corp. among its clients.

The company pulled in \$9.8 million in revenues last year, more than a 40% increase from 2002. Its services are broken into two areas: management support services and information services. The management support division emphasizes planning, marketing, and business development while the company's information services include LAN/WAN installation and management; hardware and software testing, evaluation, and installation; and help desk services. IRT has been awarded contracts totaling some \$43 million.

Anthony Underwood Automotive

TYPE OF BUSINESS Automobile dealer

PRESIDENT/CEO Anthony Underwood

LOCATION Bessemer, AL

Anthony Underwood challenges the ruthless car salesman stereotype; his customers say they don't come any better than him. Underwood owns two successful dealerships that sell previously owned cars. He opened his first dealership in 1994, leasing space from another car dealer. In about a year's time he was successful enough to buy and renovate a building for his new dealership. He opened for business with five cars.

Less than 10 years later, Underwood was able to open his second dealership. He bought the business where he got his first job as a car salesman more than 20 years prior. This time, he had a \$2.5 million inventory of vehicles on the lot.

Underwood employs 35 people and sells between 80 and 100 cars a month, fast year, he sold 1,400 vehicles and brought in revenues of more than \$10 million, and he's the first minority dealer in the U.S. to be named National Quality Dealer of the Year by the National Independent Automobile Dealers Association.

BUSINESS INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

This award recognizes companies that have set trends and broken new ground in a particular industry.

RolloverSystems Inc.

TYPE OF BUSINESS Financial service software provider

PRESIDENT/CEO Reggie Bowser

LOCATION Charlotte, NC

For Reggie Bowser, necessity was definitely the mother of invention. Having worked as a chief marketing officer charged with developing strategies to capture rollover IRA customers, and also as vice president of marketing at a lending institution, Bowser saw firsthand the hassles most

people went through trying to transfer their corporate retirement savings from one vehicle to another. Bowser's product, RolloverMarket, is a software program that helps individuals transfer their retirement savings into a tax-deferred IRA upon changing jobs.

The software is just over a year old, but Bowser has already realized a 137% jump in revenues; he'd projected 2003 revenues of about \$2 million. The market is growing so fast that, for 2004, he's projecting a 150% jump in revenues compared to last year. "All the financial institutions have responded very positively to what Rollover Systems does," he says.

Currently, Bowser has one office and 15 employees, but he has plans to open sales offices on the East and West Coasts this year.

Rideau Vineyard

TYPE OF BUSINESS Winery and Tasting Room

PRESIDENT/CEO Iris Rideau

LOCATION Santa Barbara, CA

Most of us retire to stop working, but not Iris Rideau. In 30 years, she owned three companies. Now she owns Rideau Vineyard, which she launched in 1997.

Two years prior to launching her vineyard, Rideau had to build it. She purchased 25 acres of land, complete with a historic, landmark 19th century farmhouse, and hired a consultant to help her develop it. The 15-acre vineyard has eight fulltime employees and annually produces about 6,500 cases of wine (some 78,000 bottles). And along with maintaining her vineyard, she runs a tasting room. Rideau Vineyard's revenues broke the \$1 million mark in 2002, end last year, it brought in \$1.5 million. Rideau has won several awards for her premium wines and has been written about in Wine Spectator magazine.

Competition is thick in Santa Barbara, where Rideau Vineyards is based: More than 60 other vineyards and wineries share the same general location. But Rideau sets her winery apart by offering tasty Creole cuisine at her tastings.

Orthopedic Sciences Inc.

TYPE OF BUSINESS Medical device manufacturing

PRESIDENT/CEO James K. Brannon, M.D.

LOCATION LOS Angeles

OSI is making strides in the medical world thanks to the inventions of one man. James Brannon is a board certified, practicing orthopedic surgeon who has invented three patented, FDA approved devices that help treat patients with musculoskeletal conditions: the Bone Tool, the Hip Tool, and the OT-A.

Instead of starting a company to produce a product, Brannon started OSI with a product already in hand. The Bone Tool introduced a minimally invasive bone grafting technique to the medical world, but he needed a vehicle through which to market it. Soon to follow was the Hip Tool, which is designed to prevent or delay hip replacement, and the OT-A, a device that facilitates bone marrow extraction, will be introduced to the market this year.

Brannon started OSI in 1999 and its revenues have doubled every year since. The 5-year-old company produced revenues of over \$1.2 million last year, It also entered into a national distribution agreement to manufacture the Bone Tool for Stryker Corp. (NYSE: SYK).

RISING STAR NOMINEES

This award recognizes individuals, aged 21–35, whose outstanding skills, professionalism, and perseverance have established them as future business leaders.

Latham Entertainment

TYPE OF BUSINESS Event coordination and promotion

PRINCIPALS Walter Latham

LOCATION Greensboro, NC

Walter Latham's business makes people laugh. And as a promoter of comedy shows and comic talent, such as Chris Tucker, Martin Lawrence, Steve Harvey, and Cedric the Entertainer, that's exactly what he wants it to do.

Latham, 33, entered the spotlight in 1997 when he produced the stand-up comedy showcase The Kings of Comedy featuring Steve Harvey, Cedric the Entertainer, Bernie Mac, and later, D. L. Hughley. Though he started his comedy promotions company more than 10 years ago, The Kings of Comedy, which was eventually repackaged into a motion picture, was his first big success. Soon to follow was The Queens of Comedy tour and motion picture featuring Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, Sommore, and Mo'Nique, as well as other acclaimed comedy and comedy music showcases.