

Monday, June 7, 2004

Entrepreneur teaches videoconferencing techniques to clients

Paul Davis

The Business Journal Serving the Greater Triad Area

>> [Printable Version](#)

>> [Email Story](#)

Ever had a situation during a videoconference that didn't go exactly as planned?

Whether it's a lengthy and awkward pause, or the distracting noise of papers shuffling or a pen tapping, businesses are still trying to fine-tune how they appear in front of the digital camera.

Also, executives still must decide what documents they must send to their fellow participants beforehand and how much preparation is needed for video-based meetings.

Rhonda Darnall, president of Darnall Training Solutions in High Point, believes she can address many of those problems. Her firm, created in 2001 to provide training through computers and videoconferencing, now is looking to show human resource departments how to effectively use those mediums as a way of reducing the travel costs tied to in-person tutorials.

Darnall, who has more than \$250,000 in training contracts with the federal government, knows her firm is not a well-known name in the Triad. But she is looking to address that issue this summer by debuting a series of courses in Greensboro geared toward local business.

Meanwhile, other consultants say Darnall may have found a key niche in "training the trainers" when it comes to videoconferencing and online orientation programs.

"There are obviously a lot of corporate trainers, but Rhonda has a unique opportunity to teach others about technology and its use in meetings," says Virginia Ostendorf, president of Virginia A. Ostendorf Inc., a Denver-area firm that focuses on computer-based instruction.



Julie Knight

Rhonda Darnall, president Darnall Training Solutions in High Point, has created a niche for her business with its online computer training software and by helping clients prepare for videoconferencing.

"Rhonda has been in the trenches from a user's perspective," Ostendorf says, "so she can break things down into simple steps for others."

Presentation matters

"This company is distinctive," adds Stephen Johnson, managing partner of TechSites, a training facility in Greensboro that will serve as the technology center for Darnall's courses. "These services are not something you can find flipping through a catalog. It's unique not only for the Triad but for North Carolina."

Darnall, a former middle-school teacher and trainer for Greensboro-based engineering contractor Sigcom Inc., founded her firm three years ago with a focus on creating computer-based training programs and videoconferencing materials primarily for government agencies.

Darnall Training Solutions still offers those services, but has expanded to training others on their appearance and presentation in a videoconference. For Darnall, there is a skill and art to videoconferencing that many professionals have yet to master.

There are obvious fixes, such as limiting nervous ticks like shuffling papers or tapping pens on the table. But Darnall goes beyond that. She teaches executives about preparation before a video-based meeting. She also shows them ways to communicate better in a long-distance, two-dimensional gathering.

"I am helping others adjust to videoconferencing," Darnall says. "Through workshops, I am helping people work on their camera presence."

In addition, she says the new focus should help her expand her business, particularly when it comes to drawing in more clients from the private sector.

Finding a local following

Right now, more than two-thirds of Darnall Training Solutions' business is tied to contracts with federal agencies such as the U.S. Social Security Administration and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

There are inherent challenges to landing government work. Some deals take up to two years to move from first contact to signed contract. Those contracts are up for renewal on a regular basis, and a slow economy has created intense competition.

"It is a time-consuming process and you have to travel quite a bit," she concedes.

So Darnall says her company's long-term growth will hinge on tapping into private business, with a preference for developing clients in the Triad. She admits that her company lacks a major client base on its home turf, claiming mortgage-insurer United Guaranty Corp. as her highest-profile client in the Triad.

Darnall says more companies have turned to videoconferencing to cut down on travel costs. With early signs of an economic recovery, she hopes more firms and executives will be willing to increase funding for training programs, and that her services will grow in popularity.

Just the same, Darnall is taking steps now to position for that growth. In April, she hired a marketing director who is specifically pitching the company's services to a range of other businesses.

The company also moved from a home office to an office condo just north of downtown High Point, which provides more space and a conference room to meet with nearby prospects.

Darnall Training Solutions also has teamed up with TechSites to offer training courses in Greensboro. The two companies are putting together their marketing materials in hopes of offering classes to corporate clients this summer.

"We'll provide the facility and the equipment, but Darnall is providing the brains and the content," said Johnson at TechSites. "It's not just teaching people how to use the technology, it's about keeping human conversations going across 500 miles connected by just an electronic link."

Darnall has high expectations for this endeavor, and her future growth plans hinge on its success.

Her long-term plans include increasing her focus on producing computer-based training programs. In the next two years, she wants to hire graphic artists and designers so that her company can sell more training products in High Point.

"At that point, we will need larger space," she says. "We want to be as big as we can be."

Reach Paul Davis at (336) 370-2916 or pdavis@bizjournals.com.