



CWA Spotlight: Jennifer Smith, Innovative Office Solutions

Burnsville, Minnesota



As a national sponsor of Mentoring Monday, we are spotlighting remarkable women across the country who served as mentors for the event.

Jennifer Smith is Innovative Office Solutions' CEO and Co-Founder, where she began the company in 2001 with a vision of making professionals more productive. She is very active as a mentor with the Women Venture Organization and as a member of the Forum for the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC). Married for 29 years, Jennifer remains active in her family and the community. With two children growing up fast, her involvement with their athletics has turned into a track record of coaching, fundraising, and volunteering.

Tell me about your business.

We work with customers to develop systems that keep workplaces running efficiently. We sell more than 200,000 products including paper, toner, envelopes, pens, etc. To stay relevant in a declining industry, we have to grow in different ways. Since we sell commodity products, we needed to reinvent ourselves by branching into more categories including furniture, break room & coffee supplies, managed print services and printing & promotional items. Our fastest growth is in cleaning & facility supplies, such as toilet paper, trash liners, cleaning products, etc.

In 2009, we had 50 employees. Today, we have 220 employees, and we are projected to double today's size in next 5 years. We have always experienced growth even during the recession.

What has been your key to growth?

To me, the key is our culture of having the right people in the right seats who are all working towards a focused plan. Everyone on the team knows our business purpose and vision, which we communicate frequently - Make workplaces more productive.

Relationships matter across the board – with our customers, vendors and employees. At IOS, turnover is very low. 14 years ago, we started with 21 employees, with 18 of them still on our team today.

How have you partnered your passion for athletics with your passion for your business?

I feel that giving back is important. Rather than advertising on billboards or other avenues, we partner with Minnesota sports teams and programs to build impactful programs that give back to the community. We provide supplies for the sports teams and work closely with them on their charity programs.

How have you overcome obstacles in your career?

Struggles always exist in a growing business. I like to address the adversity when it happens to determine why it happened and how it can be avoided in the future.

Do you have any advice for young women just starting out in their career?

It's important to find a mentor early on. Your mentor can be a male or female as long as it's someone you respect and trust who can help you network and guide your learning in an accelerated path.

I've had key mentors in my life, including my dad. He was very inspirational by guiding me to keep it simple and do the right thing.

What would you say has been a key to your success?

I'm truly committed to our organization and being relevant to our customer. At the foundation is having valuable relationships and not losing sight of that.

Interview Conducted By:

Deb Busch

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