

Samantha Kane

— Women in Business 2008 winner

By Henry Bury
THE INTELLIGENCER

Failing in her first entrepreneurial venture convinced Samantha Kane to learn everything she could about the business world.

She's learned the lesson well and has become a successful business owner helping companies around the world improve their telecommunications equipment and the skill set of the personnel that operate the equipment.

The 53-year-old partner in Kane-MacKay & Associates at the Loyalist Market has been helping contact/call centres be the best they can be for the past 20 years.

Last month, Kane earned international recognition for her work, by being presented with the inaugural Award for a Woman Exporter from the Organization of Women in International Trade-Toronto.

"It's extremely flattering to win this award, especially since we're not a large conglomerate but a small firm, operating out of Belleville...typically these awards go to people who sell products. We're a consulting firm and we sell intellectual property and advice."

It's also the sixth year that she has been nominated for the Canadian Women Entrepreneur of the Year while her firm has also received an Ontario Global Trader Award and nominated twice for the Canadian government's Awards of Distinction.

Now, Kane has been presented another award as Business Woman of the Year, sponsored by The Intelligencer.

She was away in Vermont this week launching a new client project and was unable to receive her latest award in person.

"It's nice to be recognized locally by our peers," Kane said. "All the ladies nominated have great stories to tell and should be recognized as well."

The Hamilton native and Queen's University graduate still laughs about her first business failure.

It was 1980 when she teamed up with a veterinarian in Toronto to launch a pet coupon book that cost \$5 but contained \$500 worth of coupons.

She had arranged a distribution centre using high schools to sell the coupon books as fundraisers.

"I didn't have a contract with the printers to deliver the coupon books on time. I couldn't deliver the product and I lost my shirt on the deal," Kane said.



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That is when she decided to go learn "proper corporate discipline" and joined IT & T as a customer service manager.

"I learned the business of telephony and selling telephone systems to businesses from the ground up," she said.

When she left the company five years later, Kane was in the top five per cent of sales staff across its 110 branches in North America.

Kane went to work for Siemens for a year, selling larger telephone systems and spent from 1984-89 with TTS, a Nortel Networks company, selling large Enterprise telephone systems.

Kane moved to Belleville in 1989 when her husband, Bill, took the job as general manager of the Ramada Inn.

She started Kane-MacKay & Associates, a telecommunications consulting practice, that same year.

"We started in the basement of our home with one computer and one full-time employee," Kane said.

Her first customer was the late Dick Baker and his Canada Transport company.

"I redesigned all of their telecommunications services across North America. And in two years, I saved him half-a-million dollars a year in telecommunications costs," she said proudly.

Kane starting doing work in Toronto in 1992 and vividly remembers her first major job first client, Bombardier, and the job of redesigning its de Havilland Inc. campus in Downsview.

"We had to replace a 6,000 line telephone system, 1.9 million square feet of cable and 42 LAN rooms across the campus. It took us two years and I lived in a 50-foot trailer in the parking lot to complete the whole process."

Kane has since expanded into the United States and Europe with such major clients as Compass Bank, Hospitals of America, Bank of Canada, brewery giant InBev, where she has helped build call centres in Budapest, Prague and Korea, and the Canadian government where she helped link all the Canadian embassies and consulates.

Kane's firm employs six people, including her husband who is a managing partner and is responsible for all the infrastructure, administration, computers and marketing. The firm also has another 50 contractors with specific skill sets that are employed for various tasks.

The firm, she noted, improves clients' telecommunications equipment and business processes.

"During this journey, we recognize that no technology can fix poor process or people's inefficient skills. So we have to grow the practice to improve people, process and technology," she said.

Call/contact centres have always played an important role in Kane's business.

Because 60 to 70 per cent of a call centre's operational cost is labour, Kane said her firm's job is "to make sure the labour force is working at premium efficiency and then we give the technology on top as a tool."

She cited examples where clients may not have been using technology properly or have made it so complicated that it is too difficult for them to use.

"We help call centres become better at what they do," Kane said.

Kane also shares her expertise with others through the organizations she belongs to.

She's a member of the Canadian Women's Foundation that helps battered women and children, the Women's Executive Network which mentors 600 young women across Canada each year and the Canadian Association of Women Executives and Enterprise, where members have demonstrated ownership of a successful company for at least five years.

"It's been a wonderful journey and it's only getting better because we have new and exciting things happening in 2009," said Kane.

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