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FAMILY OWNED BUSINESS AWARDS

Family Shifted Roles, Rolled On

FOOD: Mom champions growth, daughter handles day-to-day

■ By VITA REED

The family behind Irvine-based Susan's Healthy Gourmet Inc. faced a crossroads eight years ago: A change in roles for its executives.

The company delivers meals to its customers' homes. It also operates Lifespring Nutrition, which delivers frozen meals to senior citizens, and Xan Confections, a line of non-dairy, gluten-free, low-calorie chocolates sold in retail stores.

"There comes a time in a business where things are shifting and you have to shift with it," said Kerry Johnson Anthony, the company's president and daughter of founder and Chief Executive Susan Johnson. "If the company was going to survive and be able to move forward, Susan had to step out of day-to-day and be the champion on growing the business."

The family shifted roles and rolled on.

"The major thing is that there's a great deal of respect between us, and we work hard at communicating," Johnson said. "Kerry and I work that together, in particular, very nicely."

Up & Coming

Susan's Healthy Gourmet received the Up & Coming Business award at the annual Family Owned Business Awards lunch hosted by the Business Journal and California State University, Fullerton's Family Business



Mother-and-daughter team: "The major thing is that there's a great deal of respect between us, and we work hard at communicating," says Johnson, whose daughter (left) is company president

Council on Nov. 30 at the Hyatt Regency Irvine. It's a previous winner of a Women in Business award from the Business Journal.

The executive shift put Johnson in the role of the company's visionary.

Johnson Anthony, who joined the company eight years ago, runs most day-to-day affairs.

Other participating family members are Susan's husband, John, who is chief financial officer, and Kerry's husband, Michael Anthony, the company's logistics manager. The Johnsons' son, who lives in Texas, is a partner in Lifespring.

"We know, sometimes, that we both have to say things that aren't necessarily easy to

hear," Johnson said. "But we also know that we need to hear it, and we always accept it in the spirit it's worth."

The family is big on what Johnson Anthony calls "separate hats" when it comes to running the business and their personal lives.

"I work with my husband and my dad and my mom... I'm my dad's boss and my husband's boss," she said. "When I'm here, I try to not abuse that relationship or that position."

And when it's closing time, "I'm done," she said.

"You just change something in your brain where you go, 'Right now, I'm with Su-Su. I'm not with CEO Susan,'" Anthony said, using a nickname for her mother. "And right now, I'm with my husband, I'm not with my logistics manager."

Susan's Healthy Gourmet delivers its meals from a fleet of nine refrigerated vans that have the company's logo. The company has about 60 workers and operates from a 15,000-square-foot building on McGaw Avenue, which includes a kitchen.

The company started 16 years ago and has

grown from \$275,000 in sales in 1996 to about \$6 million today.

It bought Lifespring in 2003, and established Xan in 2009.

Susan's Healthy Gourmet got started shortly after Johnson, a native of Houston, moved to San Diego with her husband, who'd been hired to lead a project for AT&T Inc. That project was canceled, and the couple decided to stay in Southern California.

They looked for a business to buy.

"We loved it here and wanted to stay," Johnson said in an earlier interview with the Business Journal. "But we didn't want a mom-and-pop type shop."

Johnson said her family eventually told her that she should market her recipes.

"They encouraged me—there was a similar business in Houston doing meals home-delivered," she said. "I saw no one was really doing that here."

Johnson started what's now Susan's Healthy Gourmet with \$250,000 from her savings and her father.

Help From Hollywood

The company got a boost in 2004 when actor Wayne Knight of Seinfeld fame was featured in a People magazine article about how he lost weight while making Susan's Gourmet meals part of his diet. Sales shot up 40%, and the company later added "Healthy" to its name.

Sources of businesses include customer referrals, referrals from doctors and personal trainers, and advertising on the Internet, radio and in newspapers. ■