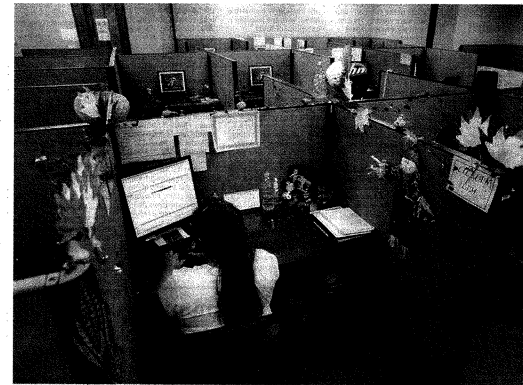


A daughter stepped in to help her mother with her business, and with her office skills she put the venture in expansion mode

Company answers call as phone needs grow



STAYING POWER: Westpark Communications' owner says workers remain with the company for an average of three years, higher than the industry average.

RESOURCES

Tuesday

Permits and Licenses for Doing Business in Houston: 9-11 a.m., UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. **Cost:** No fee. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

QuickBooks Pro 2011: Two-part course, Dec. 6 and Dec. 8, 9 a.m.-1:30 p.m., UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. **Cost:** \$129. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

Wednesday

Building a Budget: Conducted in Spanish. 9-11 a.m., UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. **Cost:** \$19. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

SBA Certification Programs: 9 a.m.-noon, UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. Get details on the U.S. Small Business Administration's 8(a) and SDB programs. **Cost:** No fee. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

Basics of Starting a Houston Business: Free seminar hosted by SCORE. 6-7:30 p.m., Kendall Branch Library,

4330 Memorial. **Information:** www.scorehouston.org.

Thursday

City of Houston Certification: 9-11 a.m., UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. **Cost:** No fee. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

Getting Started With Twitter: 9 a.m.-noon, UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. **Cost:** \$39. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

Starting Your Business: 9 a.m.-4 p.m., UH SBDC, 2302 Fannin, Suite 200. **Cost:** \$25. Includes lunch. **Registration:** www.sbdc.uh.edu.

Saturday

Small-business Tax Workshop: Hosted by the IRS and the Houston West Chamber of Commerce. 1-4 p.m., Katherine Tyra Library, 16719 Clay Road. **Topics:** Choice of business entity, payroll, independent contractors and business tax reporting. **Speaker:** Greg Vernon. **Information:** 713-302-6249.

By SANDRA BRETTEG
FOR THE CHRONICLE

WHAT began as a telephone answering service 43 years ago with three phones and three clients now rings

up some \$3 million in gross annual revenue as a contact center with close to 1,000 clients. The company's secret?

"A combination of things," owner Kathie Edwards said. "We started to hire more qualified agents, and that brought us to a whole new level. Plus, we started to target some niche markets in 2007, like retail electric and law firms."

Edwards recalled that when her mother and an aunt founded the business in 1968, they purchased a "cord board," which was a basic switchboard hooked up to a PBX system.

Today, Westpark Communications uses sophisticated computer software and houses its technology in a secure complex in College Station. Edwards said the company offers such services as appointment setting, call screening, customer surveying and order taking. But it doesn't do cold calling.

"It's difficult to find call centers that can move quickly and respond to changes in the marketplace," said Kevin Meers, vice president of operations for Texpo Energy, which uses the company to handle overflow calls, among other things. "Retail electric has evolved so much over the past 10 years, and as we came up with new products and services, we needed a company that could be flexible and keep up with us."

Edwards said she never intended to one day lead the business that her mother, Edna Wesneski, launched with her sister so many years ago.

"I told her I'd stick around and help

her straighten things out about 20 years ago, when her manager left with half her clients and half her staff," Edwards said. "I only wanted to help her get back on her feet. But when I got there, I could see there weren't any processes in place. ... Everything was in my mother's head."

The first order of business was to create policies and procedures to document her mother's knowledge for others. That led to the company's first-ever sales guides and something as basic as individual files for each client.

Over the next 15 years, Edwards helped with the acquisition of 10 local startups. With 10 years of experience as an executive assistant and provider-relations manager, Edwards felt well-versed in how to set up processes to make an office run smoothly, she said.

During this time, the company grew to 24 employees from six — and to 600 clients from fewer than 200 — by the time Wesneski was ready to retire in 2007. Edwards purchased the business and has served at its president since.

This month, the company will open a second office in northwest Houston with room for up to 150 employees.

"We chose north Houston because of its proximity to Lone Star College, and the fact that it will open up the whole Champions and Spring area to us," Edwards said. "We have seats for 70, which means we can hire about 150 people to work out there."

One of Edwards' most prized statistics is the number of years her agents tend to stay with the company.

"The industry average is less than a year, but we average three years," Edwards said. "That's the thing I like best about this company ... the people. We're all working toward the same goal — to provide great customer service — so it feels like we're all on the same team."