

Instant Brand Recognition Is Order of the Day for Indira Patel's NEOS

By Helen Graves

Indira Patel bought New England Office Supply 10 years ago with the intention of growing the small business into a major industry player. So far, she's jumped the company of then less than \$1 million in revenue into a \$35 million regional competitor with national reach. And she's not finished yet.

"We'll start looking at significant acquisition in about a year to add critical mass," says Patel, 55. "I don't want to be 70 when I achieve my aspirations."

Patel's ultimate goal for the company that offers everything from paperclips to furniture is instant brand recognition. "We're now a really strong regional player who can compete on all levels with any big name in this industry," the president and CEO says. "But I want us to be a truly recognized player, immediately coming to mind when someone thinks of a good, quality office supply company."

So the push is on for an innovative marketing effort to raise brand awareness and catapult NEOS to the next level. Internally, Patel and her team are getting ready by reevaluating systems and reviewing staff training needs — team being the operative word here.



Indira Patel is in the enviable position of being able to ready New England Office Supply for the next, major industry player level.

Through personal loyalty, inclusion and, of course, careful attention to customer service and the bottom line, Patel has created an environment for advancement throughout her organization.

As a result, NEOS is in an enviable position in this sluggish economy — debt free with solid cash flow — allowing Patel to continue forging ahead. "We've got the strongest balance sheet we've ever had," she says.

Attaining success, however, hasn't always been an easy order to fill. Unwilling to approach the dreaded corporate glass ceiling, Patel had taken a proactive stance by shopping for a business with excellent growth potential in order to create her own destiny. Less than a year into her ownership and after breaking the \$1 million mark, she combined NEOS with

two other companies to expedite critical mass. Her group encompassed the finance and administrative expertise; the other two contributed sales and operational expertise to the new entity.

Yet the industry placed little faith in the success of the new company, believing three companies with three different owners could never work together as one. It was a time, too, when the country was strug-

gling with a recession and office supply companies were falling victim to a major shakeout.

What the industry hadn't taken into account was Patel's determination backed by her shrewd capability. Customers, who had been informed of the merger, remained loyal as the new company scrambled to meet their needs while coming to grips with the three different cultures.

"The industry saw three egos and said, 'Their house of cards will fall apart,' " Patel says. "I decided there was no way that was going to happen. We closed the doors to three companies one Friday afternoon, and opened them as one company the following Monday morning."

To cement company unity, Patel learned the delicate balance of letting things occur and attacking problems head on. Policies and procedures were spelled out and emphasis was placed on developing a new company culture.

"I started thinking of my Simmons MBA program, and the courses on organizational behavior and the 'soft issues,' " Patel says. "It became so clear then that the soft issues, which I had never seen as particularly important throughout the program, were the ones that needed resolve before we could move forward as a company."

Patel empowered her managers to make day-to-day decisions that were in the best interest of the company and their customers. New employees were hired to counterbalance the new demands on a growing company.

In line with her finance and administrative know-how, she fostered a strong customer service environment — serving customers from "Req to Check" — while keeping the cost structure low and the company efficient.

People were cross-trained to help out as one area would become busier than another. Customer service and sales were teamed together in mutual support. Small acquisitions were made around adding skill sets.

Today, Patel is working with her team to take advantage of a slower pace to ready NEOS for merging with other major players.

This entails looking into a new ERP system that is above and beyond the current industry standard, advancing a new marketing effort for increased visibility and hiring outside the industry for a fresh

approach to the business. And, as always, Patel is reciprocating employees' loyalty by identifying skill holes and training at all tiers to ground them in the next level.

The explanation behind her drive to propel NEOS to leader status, Patel says in her typically direct manner, is simple: "I like a challenge." And, although it took her some time to get to her more recent level of ambition, she was raised to rely on herself at a time when girls of educated families in India did not work. Her mother had seen her own sister, widowed at an early age, forced to depend on relatives. "She did not

want that for her daughters," Patel says.

After earning her bachelor's degree in India, and not receptive to an arranged marriage at that time, Patel came to the U.S. to study, more to keep busy and have fun than to launch a career. By the time she graduated — "my mother showed up like clockwork to take me back home" — she had met her future husband and wanted to get a job here, something she could not do in her own country for fear of diminishing her father's reputation.

It was after working several years in a supervisory role in the health industry that Patel realized she'd hit her pinnacle in someone else's company. Knowing she'd need an MBA to step out on her own, she

went to Simmons to prepare for her move.

Now Patel is giving back while advancing her own company. On the business advisory board of the Massachusetts Affirmative Marketing Program, she's insisted on broadening the scope beyond helping women and minorities net state contracts by teaching them business basics for self-sufficiency. She's on the board of TriMega, a \$2 billion U.S. buying group that enables members to buy directly from the manufacturer at a cost structure similar to the major industry players', and she's TriMega's representative on its global board, BPGI. On both industry boards, she notes that she's the only woman director. Interested in the influential role business and politics can play, she was a 1995 presidential delegate to the White House's conference on small business.

"I believe to build a business that will bring me the value I desire, I must first bring value to my entire team and my customers," Patel says. "Our business is built in partnership with the New England Office Supply team, our customers and our community."

Words of Practiced Wisdom

The following are highlights of Indra Patel's tips for new and seasoned entrepreneurs.

- Before you go into business on your own, work for somebody else to get solid experience in navigating the business world.
- Choose a business that fits your lifestyle. Decide if you want a small business requiring your everyday involvement or whether you'd prefer something with critical mass that allows you to focus on the big-picture instead.
- When shopping for a business to buy, look at the income statement for proof of viability as well as at the balance sheet, the snapshot of overall well-being.
- Once you're up and running, ask questions even if you think you know the answers. This includes customers, employees, vendors, colleagues. Always question the system.
- Remember, it's the little things that can come back to bite you while you're worrying over the big things that might go wrong.