



BELL RINGER: BrightKey President Rita Hope Counts has rung up new contracts by expanding her company's offerings.

JOANNE S. LAWTON

Handling more

BrightKey steps up to offer extra services to resource-strapped associations **By Jennifer Nycz-Conner, Staff Reporter**

One of the first things that greets visitors in Rita Hope Counts' office is a giant brass hand bell. The bell is more than decoration: Each time BrightKey Inc. wins a contract, the company president eagerly rings it over the intercom.

The bell is still ringing, though less frequently than in other years, for BrightKey, which associations hire to manage their customer service and order fulfillment operations.

BrightKey's motto is "We'll handle it for you," which is what the company, based in Annapolis Junction, Md., aims to do for its clients, ranging from the American College of Physicians to the Water Environment Federation.

When Counts founded the business in 1988, "handling it" meant functioning as a mailing house. Since that time, BrightKey has taken on more tasks for associations, such as outsourced customer service and strategic communications.

Many of BrightKey's clients are feeling the economic pinch. They are slashing budgets, staff and programs, although some associations are growing, including those working with green industries and self-employed professionals.

For associations with less to spend, BrightKey's

services are just the thing they are looking for to help hold down costs while maintaining relationships with their members.

From her company's beginning, Counts handled sales: She would open up directories of associations, then start calling and knocking on doors, working her way from A to Z.

"You could really start telling when I was in the N's," she says, laughing. "All the 'Nationals' started showing up as new clients."

Looking back on those early days, Counts acknowledges she didn't have a sophisticated strategy for expansion, but her once-small mailing house has grown into a company of 183 employees and three warehouses taking up 325,000 square feet.

The key to that expansion, Counts says, was adding revenue streams based on customer requests. She asked clients what they needed.

When they told her and asked if she offered those services, "I'd say 'yes,' and then I'd run back and say, 'How the hell do I do that?'"

Besides doing membership mailings, BrightKey began shipping out books, a process Counts refers to as "pick, pack and ship."

In 1998, she started getting requests for mem-

bership processing. Now, the company also serves as an off-site customer service provider, handling association member inquiries on such matters as renewals and signing up for conferences.

"We're set up where it's not one big '1-800' call center," Counts says. "Every client has its own project manager."

Recently, Counts established a marketing division, hiring marketing pro Sally Roffman to assist BrightKey clients.

Roffman earlier had helped the company with a re-branding program, which changed its name from Professional Mailing and Distribution Services Inc. to BrightKey Inc.

Counts thinks more slices of the membership processing pie remain on the table for her to grab. She is considering an events planning component. Her staff is already handling registration and staffing for many association conferences and events, so stepping into the actual planning side earlier in the process feels like a natural evolution.

While 2009 hasn't seen much in the way of growth, Counts says she isn't worried.

She has been through other downturns, including her roughest period, the 1991 recession. Counts had just laid out a good deal of capital to expand into the warehousing business, and suddenly services that had been requested were called back.

The lesson she learned helps her now: There's no need to panic, Counts says, "because everything is on a cycle."

Sometimes that bell rings a lot, sometimes less frequently. But the key, she says, is to keep it ringing.

Counts' take-away: Persistence and relationship building are key. Customers must trust you before they're going to work with you.

Company: BrightKey Inc.

CEO: Rita Hope Counts

What it does: Customer service, warehousing, fulfillment and mailing services for associations

Headquarters: Annapolis Junction, Md.

Employees: 183

Revenue:

2007: \$10 million

2008: \$12 million

2009: Between \$12 million and \$13 million (projected)