



TWO MINUTES

Bob Gigione

Chair woman

Meredith Waldner Stern has designs on your office space

President of Farmingdale-based Waldner's Business Environments, Meredith Waldner Stern is the third generation to lead this family-owned firm, which was founded by her grandfather in 1939. Since then, Waldner's has grown from a small local stationary store to a major player in the office furnishings industry, with more than 100 employees in three locations. Stern has helped create many of the best-addressed office spaces on Long Island, in Manhattan and other parts of the country. She specializes in equipping companies to ensure the most productive, technologically advanced and safe workplaces.

How have the needs of businesses changed in the last few years? I would say the biggest change in the industry has been technology and the integration of technology into furniture. It's now part of everyday work, so furniture and technology, which used to be two different industries for a business, are now very often integrated or are one product. You used to just have conference tables, for example. Now there are conference tables that allow people to share content on their laptops. You plug into the conference table and the content comes up on screens, allowing you to have a work meeting sharing content instead of just looking at everyone else's laptop or other devices. It's all part of the table now.

Can you give us a brief snapshot of the latest design trends in office furniture? Open area collaborative spaces, low panels or no pan-

els, with layouts that allow for eye contact and more interaction. I think a lot of businesses have learned that work is not just done in a workstation. So aside from just workstations, there are enclaves and breakout areas at a lot of companies allowing employees to collaborate. It's a very creative way of working now. We want people to be able to work anywhere, not just at their desks, so we'll create little areas to help them do it.

What's Waldner's most busy with these days besides selling office furniture?

We sell a lot of technology products now, like room reservation systems that a company can use to track how its conference rooms are being used. Do they need more? Do they need fewer? Are they being utilized as much as they could? We have products and software that can help a business track how these different areas

are being used. Aside from selling office furniture, we also maintain office furniture and do corporate moves. Anything to do with furniture, we're turnkey.

Has the demand for office furnishings declined along with the sluggish real estate market and increase in telecommuting?

I would say it's changed. It's changed a lot in that we offer different ways that clients can be more efficient and effective, whether that's through telecommuting, or whether it's not having a traditional workspace and having more meeting areas or shared workstations. In addition to office furniture, we are leaders in health care and education furniture, so there are a lot of other markets we can now call on.

What's Waldner's relationship with Corporate Workplace Services and how has that helped the business grow?

We're actually a founding member of Corporate Workplace Services. It's a network of service providers. If we have a client locally who wants to furnish an office in another state, they are guaranteed the same level of service as locally. That's really allowed us to expand. About 40 percent of our business came from outside the metropolitan area, so it's opened up opportunities for us.

What are the best and worst parts about running a family business? The best part is that there's a trust there and there's a shared goal, and you know it from beginning to end, and that's a huge plus in working with your family. The biggest challenge is leaving it in the office and having a family relationship outside of the office.

Has being certified as a woman-owned business helped Waldner's sales? It's presented tremendous opportunity for us. I'm the third generation, and when we transitioned to me, we were able to become certified as a women's business enterprise. What that means for us is that government and many private industries have missions and goals to create relationships with women- and minority-owned businesses, so because of our strong capabilities, our experience, we're in a strong position to help them with these goals.

Waldner's best-selling item? An ergonomic chair.

Item sold in the 1940s that's still available today? Steel file cabinets. Even though it's supposed to be a paperless world, we still sell a lot of them.

— DAVID WINZELBERG