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Picture perfect

Kinzelman Art Consulting has sculpted a comfortable spot for itself

Houston Business Journal by Catherine Spaulding, Houston Business Journal

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Julie Kinzelman began her art career behind the lens of a camera, one eye carefully locked on the image through the viewfinder.

These days, she has set the camera aside to focus both eyes on selecting the perfect piece of art to complement a corporate environment.

Kinzelman, a former photography student, launched **Kinzelman Art Consulting** in late 2000, hoping to use her skills to add color and texture to local companies.

Kinzelman Art Consulting acquires, installs and maintains individual works or entire collections of art for companies in Houston and other cities around the United States.

Today, the company boasts an impressive client list and almost \$500,000 in revenue to date.

Almost two and a half years after its inception, the company shows no sign of slowing down. In fact, things are so busy that, "I can't take a deep breath," Kinzelman says.

The fast pace is just what Kinzelman was hoping for when she decided to branch out on her own after serving as an employee of a larger art consulting firm in Houston.

After six years, Kinzelman realized that she had outgrown working for someone else's company and had a yearning to create something of her own.

"Art," she says, "is constantly re-inventing itself -- and a successful art consultant has to do the same thing."

Kinzelman had enough contacts -- corporate, personal and art-related -- to feel secure that her company would flourish.

"I wanted to see where I could go," she says.

Kinzelman started laying the ground work for the company in November of 2000, and got rolling in January 2001.

"It's an absolutely gut-wrenching experience," Kinzelman says of her decision to strike out on her own. "But at the same time, there's a higher level of excitement that drives you to dive in."

The company was started with \$6,000 of Kinzelman's savings and a \$10,000 loan from her parents.

Kinzelman began with two employees, so she had to deal with immediate overhead costs. She also began with one client from her former firm, McCord Development. A few other clients followed suit when they caught wind that Kinzelman was out on her own.

Today, three-fourths of her clients come from design firm or architectural firm references.

As head of Kinzelman Art Consulting, Kinzelman works closely with a framing company and with her husband, Christopher Tribble, who owns Ty Art Services. Tribble oversees the transport and storage of her clients' art, as well as assists with installation.

Down to business

Kinzelman, who started out as a photojournalism major but ended up with a masters degree in fine arts photography and art history, says her biggest challenge in the beginning was being a business owner with no formal business training.

Kinzelman initially worked under what she refers to as "severe guidance" from a select group of friends and her parents, all of whom have business backgrounds.

With their help, she was able to create a realistic business plan and set reasonable goals for turning a profit.

She also learned how to create a comfortable workplace, keep low overhead and how to financially manage a business.

"I feel like I've earned my business degree," Kinzelman says of her experience so far.

Although business know-how is a must in any industry, Kinzelman says art consulting isn't always about art -- it's about people.

Learning to read the client is the biggest challenge an art consultant faces, she says.

After consulting with a company, Kinzelman immediately begins showing art to her clients, "to start a dialogue," she says.

A client can visit a gallery, or view reproductions of the artwork, but her favorite method is to bring in the actual work itself.

"Nine times out of 10, we've been right on the money with the art we've brought in," she says.

Kinzelman says she constantly asks herself how her firm can differentiate itself from competitors.

"At the beginning I asked myself, why does Houston need another art consulting firm?" she recalls. "What is the historic role that an art consultant plays? And how can I do it differently?"

Jim Hanlin, a principal with Ziegler Cooper Architects who has been working with Kinzelman since her firm's inception, has an answer.

"Art isn't usually in the front of an executive's mind when designing an office space," Hanlin says, "And Julie can speak about the higher elements in language her clients can understand."

He also mentions her eye for choosing art.

"She can unearth exquisite art and stretch a budget like nobody can," Hanlin says.

Kinzelman says her ability to relate to both corporate executives and the art world helps to "demystify the process of collecting art."

She adds that her firm is unique in its all-female staff, which she says offers a "youthful but educated" vantage point.

Change artist

Kinzelman learned early on the challenges of operating in tough times. Since launching Kinzelman Art Consulting, she has weathered an ongoing economic downturn, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Enron Corp. scandal and the war with Iraq.

Operating in this environment drove her to diversify her services.

For example, although a client might only need one piece of art, or simply archiving or re-framing services, Kinzelman uses such projects as a foundation to create opportunities for larger projects.

She also seeks to educate clients on the role that art plays in a corporate environment, and how it reflects a corporate philosophy.

"People rush in and out of offices with complete disregard for what's hanging on the walls," she says.

Kinzelman tries to change this habit by educating her clients about the artist and the work itself.

And she keeps her finger on the pulse of the art world by constantly traveling and keeping contacts nationwide, and by reading art magazines and periodicals. She tries to "sponge up as much information" as she can.

In searching for art, however, Kinzelman starts at home. At least 50 percent -- sometimes as much as 75 percent -- of her artists are regional.

Kinzelman also strives to support emerging or mid-career artists, and constantly pursues art that she believes will increase in value. Kinzelman points out that the investment aspect she creates can be an added incentive for clients.