

Setting the stage: massAV

Former nurse steps into an unexpected role and builds a full-service event-staging company

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Patricia Basteri knows how to handle a challenge.

When her husband, Larry, died in 1985, she stepped into the role of president and CEO of **massAV**, the audiovisual services company he had founded 10 years earlier.

Over time, Basteri steered the Billerica-based company to new levels of growth by helping to transform it into a comprehensive event-staging company — encompassing audio and video production, lighting and creative services.

MassAV, which employs 45 staff members, grew revenue to \$9 million in 2008 from just under \$8 million in 2007 and counts such organizations as **EMC** and **Gillette Stadium** among its roughly 400 clients.

Now Basteri faces a new challenge: keeping massAV on a growth track at a time when it is projecting a decrease of about 29 percent in revenue this year.

She points to a number of factors for the drop-off, not the least of which is the recession, which has resulted in far fewer corporate events. There's also the absence of business from certain political events, such as last year's presidential election. And, there is the loss of a number of other one-time events, which did not repeat this year.

"Certainly, there have been other down periods, and we've survived them. And we will again. We're confident in that," said Basteri, 60. "We have a strong team and a strong product."

In addition to active sales outreach to its customers, the company has increased its marketing budget and will spend about \$25,000 over the next three to six months on those efforts, said Basteri.

MassAV has also recently joined a national independent network of professional event-staging companies, known as the **Rental and Staging Network Inc.**, whose intent is to exchange information, support events within the region they represent and increase their collective buying power.

The company also continues to work in different geographic markets with its clients, as needed. It provides in-house service to nine

independently owned hotels and facilities throughout the U.S. — including, most recently, the **Holiday Inn Washington-College Park** in College Park, Md.

But, perhaps its biggest growth strategy has been the evolution of its business model over time.

In its early years, the company was primarily involved with the delivery and pickup of basic AV equipment, such as small audio systems. These were small job orders of anywhere from \$25 to \$200. It then became a hotel AV company, providing daily, in-house support to more than 25 properties in New England. But as national contracts became the norm in the late 1990s, the company realized it needed to make another change.

"We could see that our company was probably not going to be strongly competitive in that area," she said. "Our strategy was to transition to doing more complex, larger events for corporate and association clients, using higher-end equipment and gradually building a reputation for ourselves in that area."

Ten years ago, the company introduced its staging services division, which handles the integration of various event production elements — from audio and video to lighting to special effects to rigging services.

The process necessitated no less than developing "a totally different team of people," said Basteri. That included bringing on industry veteran **Jeffrey Robinson**, who currently serves as vice president, to head up that department in 2001.

MassAV also made major reinvestments in its equipment; Basteri estimates that it has spent anywhere from \$250,000 to \$750,000 annually on that area. That includes about \$100,000 it invested on fogscreen projection technology about a year ago.

Five years ago, massAV introduced a creative services division that produces such event elements as opening video modules and large-format banners used for set design. "We can be flexible in how we offer services," said Basteri of this one-stop-shop approach.

Today, the company handles events ranging in size from \$1,500 to \$200,000. About 70 percent of the company's revenue comes from event-staging services for a variety of clients, while 30 percent comes from contracted work in hotels and other facilities.

"MassAV is intricately involved in all aspects



W. Marc Bernsau

Patricia Basteri took the helm of massAV in 1985 when her husband, who founded the company, died.

of the show and planning, and go above and beyond their call of duty to ensure that the entire package is of high caliber," said **Kiki Mills**, president of the **Massachusetts Innovation & Technology**

Exchange, for whom massAV has provided event production and creative services for its annual **MITX Interactive Awards** program.

With an eye on improving its business processes, massAV last year brought in business consultant **Tom Stimson** of **The Stimson Group** in Dallas.

"They're a good example of controlled growth," said Stimson. "They've put things in place carefully and methodically. ... They've made some very wise choices in equipment."

As the company has evolved over the years, so has Basteri herself.

Basteri helped husband Larry launch massAV in 1975. At the time, she was working as a psychiatric nurse.

Ten years later, when Larry lost his fight with cancer, Basteri stepped into the top spot at the company. She admits that at the time she found the role overwhelming, but she committed to learning the business.

"My big thing was just coming in and being present every day," she said.

For other entrepreneurs who might find themselves in a similar scenario, Basteri offers the following advice: "Find a personal mentor outside the business, build a small advisory board to help guide you, don't be afraid to act on your instincts and learn from your mistakes."

FAST FACTS

Patricia Basteri became president and CEO of massAV, the company founded by her husband, Larry, in 1975, upon his death in 1985.

Over the past 10 years, the company has evolved its services to become a full event-staging company, with capabilities in audio/video, lighting and creative services.

The company, which reached \$9 million in revenue in 2008, expects a 29 percent drop-off this year. It is responding by increasing marketing, active sales outreach and joining a nationwide network of event-staging companies.