

STRATEGIES IN SMALL BUSINESS

June 16, 20

Food fit for a KING

By TAMARA CARMEL THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

GREENSBORO — From comedian George Carlin to funk musician George Clinton, Edie Lutz has fed them all. And seen it all.

There was the time she was setting up food in a country singer's dressing room, and he walked in wearing nothing but...well, nothing. She covered her eyes and ducked out as fast as she could.

And there was rock band ZZ Top. "Now they were characters!" she said.

As the caterer of choice for the Greensboro Coliseum, Edie Lutz's Culinary Visions Catering Inc. has served celebrities ranging from mellow music king Barry Manilow to crooner Luther Vandross.

"We just treat them like we treat everyone else," Lutz said.

Then again, maybe it would make more sense to say that she treats everyone as if they were celebrities.

She's convinced that's the secret to her success: Not only are the clients always right, but the ultimate goal is to please them absolutely. Whatever it takes, her staff will do it.

That leads to some challenges, said Gene Dolan, the 7-year-old company's general manager. "We specialize in custom-designing menus," he said, and that makes it harder sometimes. They can no more use a canned menu than they could use canned fruit in a salad.

It's that kind of special attention that has brought success to Culinary Visions, Lutz said.

Organizational skills

Sometimes working 10 or more events at any given

PLEASE SEE **CULINARY VISIONS**, PAGE 15



LENNY COHEN/THE BUSINESS JOURNAL
Edie Lutz, president and owner of Culinary Visions Catering, has gained success by making her clients feel like celebrities, even when they are not. Her business specializes in custom-designed menus.

CULINARY VISIONS: Greensboro catering business finding its reputation is its strongest marketing tool

From page 14

time, the ability to organize and keep to a schedule is paramount for Lutz.

She learned those skills while putting together special events for the Greensboro Area Convention & Visitor's Bureau as a sales manager.

"I was working on events that would fill up the coliseum," she said.

Later on in her career, she moved to the coliseum itself as a sales and marketing director. Not only were the skills she learned in those jobs essential, but so were the contacts she made.

"That probably made a huge difference, having those contacts," she said.

In an industry that gets new business mostly by word of mouth, Lutz hasn't done much advertising, except for the occasional print ad, the Yellow Pages or custom-printed mints and napkins.

Instead, friends and clients recommend her to their friends. And they tell two friends, and they tell two friends.

Friendly recommendations

That's how she got her first job, actually. Through networking, the Guilford County Florists Association hired her to cater one of its meetings before she had even finished setting up the business.

"We didn't even own salt and pepper shakers," Lutz said. "We still do them once or twice a year, and are starting to do their monthly meetings."

For social events, there's even more word-of-mouth traffic.

'We came on when there were very few caterers in the area for that upper-end look and upper-end food.'

EDIE LUTZ

OWNER, CULINARY VISIONS

Greensboro-based builder Sandra Anderson doesn't know how her daughter heard of Culinary Visions, but once Anderson met Lutz and looked over a sample menu for her daughter's wedding, she was sold. That was the first time Anderson used Culinary Visions, but it wasn't the last.

"She's done everything from a political fund-raiser at our house, to a company dinner, to a luncheon for my son's kindergarten class' parents," said Anderson, of Sandra Anderson Builders Inc.

Anderson recommends Culinary Visions to her friends and acquaintances.

Recommendations from people like Anderson have led to a full schedule for Lutz, who runs corporate and social events, formal dinners and cook-outs, ranging from two guests to 7,000.

"Culinary Visions was very fortunate," she said. "We came on when there were very few caterers in the area for that

WHO'S IN CHARGE

Name: Edie Lutz

Title: President and owner

Education: B.A. Bauder College, Atlanta. Meeting Planners International Certification.

Goal yet to be achieved: "I wouldn't mind having more of a piece of the (local catering business) pie."

Family: Single, with five cats, one dog and two horses on a 21-acre farm in Randolph County

upper-end look and upper-end food."

Presentation skills

Lutz has also advertised her services on the Internet for the past five years, and recently revamped the page so that it could be found on more search engines.

"There's no point in having the page if people can't find it, she said.

"We're not there for e-commerce," she said, although there is a form for interested parties to ask for more information.

The site holds details about the kinds of events Culinary Visions can handle, what it specializes in and, most importantly, photos of past events.

The presentation of the food is almost as important as the taste of the food, she said.

In fact, a big yearly event for the catering company is the Piedmont Business Showcase at the coliseum. Winning the

COMPANY PROFILE

Company: Culinary Visions Catering

Address: 2006-A Vandalia Road,

Greensboro 27407

Number of employees: 10 full time and 20 part-time

1999 sales and profits: Declined to disclose

Major challenge: Having enough time to get everything done, while sometimes running 10 events simultaneously.

Solution: Hiring a dedicated staff that acts as a team.

Web site: www.culinaryvisions.com

award for the best display at the show is a highlight for Lutz.

Part of her core business is setting up pleasing presentations, so if Culinary Visions doesn't win the award, she said, something's wrong. Her staff viewed the award not as a nice surprise but as a test of their skills.

And it gave them a chance to show off some of the presentation ideas they've come up with, like a garden or picnic theme on a buffet table. Lutz wants people to know that they can handle a variety of types of event and can make them all as individual as the clients themselves.

"We don't want to be locked in," she said. "Catering and food and presentation is a whole world of stuff. It's not just weddings."

TAMARA CARMEL can be reached at 271-6539 ext. 2862 or tcarmel@amcity.com.