

A one-stop shop for business needs



SHERRY LAVARS/STAFF

Radstons Office Supply warehouse manager Jessie Bernardino checks the contents of a box at the Hercules business. The company employs all of its own delivery drivers instead of using UPS.

Store personally delivers with no minimum order

By David Morrill

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HERCULES — Diane Griffin knows that if you don't adapt to a world in flux, you will be left behind.

That's especially the case in her world, where her company, Radstons Office Supply has gone through a makeover in an industry that has seen similar firms put out of business by big-box retailers such as OfficeMax, Office Depot and Staples.

"Most of those that tried to go toe-to-toe with them and didn't adapt aren't around anymore," Griffin said.

Radstons Office Supply is the conduit between wholesale distributors and the customers Griffin serves. Among the 30,000 items in its catalog is everything from paper and office furniture to snacks and bottled water. Because it's part of a cooperative buying group, the prices are competitive with many of the big-box

retailers, Griffin said.

"We are the grocery store for businesses," she said. "If there's something a business needs for its office, they go to us for it."

Radstons today is a far cry from the one that originated in Berkeley in 1908. Except for the name and some of the supplies it sells, the company that was originally a "turn-of-the-century sleepy walk-in retail stationery store" situated

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along Shattuck Avenue has an entirely new business model.

Gone are the Beanie Babies that kept the company afloat in the late '90s, and in its place is a business that has exited the retail space completely. The company operates 60 percent online, with the balance brought in through phone and in-person sales.

Radstons brings in annual revenue of about \$4 million.

"Right now we are holding steady," Griffin said. "Would we like to see our numbers go up, sure, but I think in this economy the fact that we're not going backward is a good thing."

Back in the 1980s there were about 15,000 independent office supply dealers in the United States. Today there are between 3,000 and 3,500, said Chris Bates, president of the National Office Products Alliance in

Virginia.

"Those that have survived are the dealers that are nimble and are able to go aggressively after the small and midsize businesses," he said. "They are the ones that will do whatever it takes to make a customer feel special as opposed to being one of many."

And customer service is the main stamp that Griffin has tried to bring to the company after she took over full operational control in 2003.

One of the biggest changes she made was to eliminate minimum orders and service charges. Even though it might be an inconvenience, and a financial loss, to drive supplies across the Bay Area, it is a trade-off for building the trust of her customers.

"My philosophy of management is to deal with the total experience and not try to develop rules for the exceptions," she said.

"If I have someone that's constantly ordering a \$2 box of pens to have delivered I'd rather make a single call to try to change that behavior than change the rules for everybody."

So if somebody who places a \$200 order forgets to add a \$5 box of file folders, she will have them personally deliv-

ered the next day.

"And as a result of this, I can almost guarantee you, my minimum orders are larger on the average than many of the big-box chains," she added.

Also, instead of UPS, she uses her own trucks and drivers to make the deliveries to the 98 percent of her customers that are in the Bay Area.

"My drivers are part of that experience of ordering from my company," she said. "The only way to control the customer service they receive is to do it ourselves. If I used UPS, I would be no different than anyone else out there."

Steve Fox works for the city of Hercules, which is a client of Radstons. He says the ease of communication is a big reason he prefers working with it than a big-office supplier.

"Every single one of them will do whatever they can to help me out and make sure I understand what I'm getting," said Fox, who has been ordering from Radstons since 2005. "It's nice to be able to call them and feel like they want to help us."

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Griffin