

Pinnacle Awards honor business risk takers, innovators

By Staff reports
March 18, 2006

Risk-taking and innovation characterized the 2006 winners of the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership's Pinnacle Business Awards, honored Friday at a dinner at the Knoxville Convention Center.

This is the second year the Partnership has presented the awards, which honor businesses in four categories and individuals in two.

About 600 people were expected at Friday night's event.

The winners:

- Innovator Award: Radio Systems Corp.

Founded 15 years ago, Radio Systems now produces more than 400 products for pets and is the largest manufacturer of pet training equipment in the United States. Its PetSafe products are sold in pet stores, mass merchant outlets, online, at farm and home stores and through mail-order catalogs worldwide.

The company uses 700 pet owners and twice as many animals in product development, including local research at its PetSafe Village. Last year, it launched IdeaFetch, an online contest soliciting product ideas. More than 5,000 were submitted.

Other finalists: NuSAFE Inc. and PIPS Technology Inc.

- Small Business Excellence Award: Impact Associates

Given to a consistently growing business with 50 or fewer employees, Impact was honored for finding capital, operating efficiently, controlling expenses and building customer loyalty.

The Maryville management-consulting firm started an events function four years ago that provides long-term contracts and steady income, and among its trademarked products is a workshop, "The Emotionally Intelligent Manager," based on the work of Yale and University of Connecticut researchers.

Its revenue and work force has grown (founded in 1999, it now employs 11, with 15 contract consultants) and counts among clients Bush Brothers, ImagePoint, TVA and government clients including the National Nuclear Security Administration.

Other finalists: Ernie Gross Designs Inc. and InSite Development Corp.

- Minority Business Excellence Award: Premiere Building Maintenance

Founded in 1996 by Mark Isom, Premiere now employs 280 in more than 20 locations in New York, Georgia, Virginia, the Carolinas and Tennessee and has annual revenue approaching \$5 million.

Isom has grown primarily with private sector work in recent years, using marketing strategies including targeting proposals to clients found on Internet procurement sites and customizing capabilities statements for potential clients. The firm cleans 7.5 million square feet at more than 200 facilities and reports its employee turnover rate is less than half the industry's national average.

Other finalists: BDT Development & Management LLC and GEM Technologies Inc.

□ Young Entrepreneur Award: Jimmy Rodefer, Rodefer Moss & Co.

Rodefer became CEO of his accounting firm in 1999 determined that the Greeneville-based company would grow. He opened a Knoxville office with little working capital or name recognition, living off personal savings and putting his salary back into the firm.

Now with more than 100 employees in Knoxville and offices also in Nashville and Kingsport, Rodefer Moss offers information technology, disaster recovery, employee leasing and small business entrepreneurial services as well as tax and audit accounting. Its Technologies Group is one of the largest IT infrastructure providers in the region.

The company also has played a role in accounting at disasters such as the World Trade Center attack, hurricanes Katrina and Rita and wildfires in the West.

□ James A. Haslam II Leadership Award: Rodney Lawler, Lawler-Wood

Named last year for its first recipient, this award honors a longtime business leader who exhibits strength in character, resolve, exemplary success and commitment to the community.

Lawler was a city manager and executive director of Knoxville's Community Development Corp. prior to founding real estate development company Lawler-Wood in 1975.

Among his many roles, he is on the local and national boards of Young Life; is finance chairman for Project GRAD, a local educational initiative; and with his wife, Dell, is founder of the Cornerstone Foundation of Knoxville, which has been involved in facilitating projects such as the Great Schools Partnership; downtown revitalization; and community leadership.