

## **Georgia's Business #415**

### **Guests:**

**Gena Knox, CEO, Fire and Flavor**

**Bob McNeil, CEO, IMAGES USA**

**Ginny Rainey, Dir. of Business Development, R.F. Knox, Co.**

### **Richard Warner:**

Welcome I'm Richard Warner and this week on Georgia's Business your about to get a since of the upcoming leaders in Georgia. Every year Georgia Trend Magazine names 40 up and comers under the age of 40, talk about depression, three of the honorees are with us this week Gena Knox founded a online clicking website called Fire and Flavor, Bob McNeil launched a multicultural marketing and communications company called Images USA, and Ginny Rainey is head of a business development division of a metal working company which is called R.F. Knox based in Smyrna, welcome to all of you and you now have the floor, give us in two sentences or less what is it you do?

### **Ginny Rainey:**

Absolutely, R.F. Knox Company is a sheet metal contracting company; we fabricate and install a variety of metal products in three divisions, industrial, HVHC, and specialty architectural metals.

### **Richard Warner:**

Family business?

### **Ginny Rainey:**

Absolutely.

### **Richard Warner:**

You been with them?

### **Ginny Rainey:**

Four months

### **Richard Warner:**

Four months in the family business?

### **Ginny Rainey:**

Yes

### **Richard Warner:**

The heat is on...

### **Ginny Rainey:**

Exactly.

**Richard Warner:**

And she's in charge of sales. Bob what do you do?

**Bob McNeil:**

I'm president and CEO of Images USA, we're a multi-cultural marketing communications company, basically we come up with marketing research and advertising strategies to reach the African-American and Hispanic market.

**Richard Warner:**

Is this your baby, did you found it?

**Bob McNeil:**

I did out of my Georgia Tech dorm actually.

**Richard Warner:** Awesome. Ok and third Gena, tell me what you do?

**Gena Knox:**

Well at Fire and Flavor we have Atlanta products that are all natural easy to use that help the at-home cook create gourmet yet healthy delicious meals.

**Richard Warner:**

Website?

**Gena Knox:**

We have website full of recipes and easy to use products and I do the majority of the sells for the company.

**Richard Warner:**

I'm curious o.k., we hear such gloom and doom, we hear big companies small companies everybody is ringing their hands, the sky is falling, floor is yours, is the sky falling?

**Ginny Rainey:**

Certainly I can speak for the R.F. Knox Company, we're beginning to experience a tightening of the belt from the commercial industry, residential obviously has been the hardest hit but we are beginning to experience a tightening of the belt. We have a lot of work in the healthcare and higher education industries and a lot of that starting to really slow down for us.

**Richard Warner:**

How many employees?

**Ginny Rainey:**

Over 200 employees that our out in the Atlanta market.

**Richard Warner:** Fourth Generation.

**Ginny Rainey:**

We are entering our 94th year of business.

**Richard Warner:**

It would imply the three people here at this table, it would imply, could be wrong, are the best capitalized therefore perhaps a little bit more able to withstand ups and downs particularly downs better, are you seeing any impact are you all seeing any impact of what's going on?

**Gena Knox:**

So far fortunately for us we have not significant impact, when we have products that people use to cook at home, and I think right now with this economy most people are really cutting out of their budget the going out to eat than eating at you know restaurants, their coming home to cook more gourmet meals and try to have the restaurant experience at home. So far we're actually this third seltzer up over last year.

**Richard Warner:**

Does it scare you?

**Bob McNeil:**

It doesn't scare me. I think we certainly seen impact to our customers from the slowing of the economy, you have people like Jim Stingle the former CMO of Proctor and Gammo come out you know encouraging law makers to vote for the bailout, I mean its a global crisis right now and it has infected our industry, fortunately for us we haven't seen a down-turn in the spending from our major customers. A lot of what we do helps them make money and so when you see companies as mentioned earlier tightening the belt and things like that they tend to stick to their core fundamentals. The markets that we represent in the marketing and advertising continuum are actually experiencing drought as oppose to retraction and so they see it as a good investment.

**Richard Warner:**

You'll are Gen Xers, right? Not to put everybody in a bucket but that is the era that we're talking about, right? You have not been through one of these because the last one really was in 1990; this is new ground for you. I'm not getting a whole lot concern about that.

**Gena Knox:**

No we're definitely concerned, the grocery sells are all down so and we have not seen a direct impact on us quite yet but we don't know what the future holds for sure, so we are tightening back where we can and being aware.

**Richard Warner:**

CEO, Head of Sells, CEO CEO. Where do you go to get beat up, where do you go for advice for how to run your business and grow it, from people who aren't going to tell you what you want to hear?

**Gena Knox:**

Well for us, I actually work with my husband; we both own the company together and work together on a daily basis.

**Richard Warner:**

So you beat each other up?

**Gena Knox:** We have each other, we really surround ourselves with smart people that can really help us and we got great friends that are in different types of industry from banking to lawyers that we can lean on for advice...

**Richard Warner:**

And what have you asked them, what have they told you?

**Gena Knox:** Well just you know, we have friends that kind of help us look out for the financial market and you know we sell to a lot of major chains and we have had two customers this year that have gone chapter 11 which that has effected us a little bit, so we have some friends that can help us keep a eye on the market and what you know we can possibly see in the future with are customers so.

**Richard Warner:**

You have forty employees?

**Bob McNeil:**

Forty something employees, yeah.

**Richard Warner:**

Where do you go to get beat up, who's going to tell you what you don't want to hear?

**Bob McNeil:**

I agree a lot with Gena, surrounding yourself with smart people is very very important and we have other partners in our practice and try to subscribe to that philosophy of you know hiring the smartest people you can possibly afford and not being afraid for them to tell you the truth and really listen to them. Also, have a number of sort of I wouldn't really call them peers more like mentors, folks that might be local or might not be so local, a re running other companies, I try to get together on a consistent basis either face to face or over the phone. You know pose those same kind burning questions of managing growth and working with HR and employees our business is really human capital, we don't manufacture widgets, we sell brain power and creativity so its a people management skill that I seek the most advice on and folks that aren't inherently in your business or so don't necessarily answer to you are always willing to tell you the truth.

**Richard Warner:**

Bill Gates said that he made more mistakes on that people side of the business of Microsoft than anything else that he did in his career. Do you feel like you've made mistakes?

**Bob McNeil:**

Certainly. Yeah I definitely made mistakes; I mean we are in a continuous learning environment, so the most important thing is the fact that you made the mistake it's the fact that you won't repeat the same mistake.

**Ginny Rainey:**

Yeah you learn from it for sure.

**Bob McNeil:**

Exactly.

**Richard Warner:**

Family business, that's got to be I mean fourth generation got's to be even more of an intricate balance between growing and culture, you have dynamics that these folks don't have.

**Ginny Rainey:**

Absolutely.

**Richard Warner:**

How does that work?

**Ginny Rainey:**

It's actually worked out very well, statistics I've heard recently, three to four percent chance of success for our company being in the fourth generation so certainly that poses its challenges but as for as who I get feedback from and continually encouraged by we got a lot family resources obviously, my father has been excellent to be a just a great sounding board but he's very clear to offer advice but then simply state you know your the decision maker and my brother has implied that same philosophy...

**Richard Warner:**

He means that, he gives you that helpful advice based on his years in the business but then says you know really it's up to you?

**Ginny Rainey:**

Absolutely, I think you know its pretty common when you hear a family business that there's squabbles and conversations of that nature that come along side that and we've had the great fortune not to encounter that even though we're four months young into the relationship with my bother, our relationships founded on respect and trust and we really been able to really capitalize that on the first few months.

**Richard Warner:**

Can I ask how do you all see yourself different in the way that you operate your business than what your parents would have done? That can even fall into to how you were raised, how's it different?

**Bob McNeil:**

Two of my biggest mentors are actually my grandfather on my mother's side and then my dad, my father's been in private practice in the medical field over thirty something years so he's definitely a entrepreneur, and so I thought I had great trainers because just even growing up in my household and listening to my grandfather when he was younger, they were always a certain you know moments of clarity where you gots some wisdom that you necessarily expect to maybe at that time or learned a lesson that turned out to be a life long lesson and...

**Richard Warner:**

Give me one...

**Bob McNeil:**

I certainly try to learn from their mistakes but more importantly I try to model myself in the success that they had, you know one of the things my grandfather mentioned to me, I had gotten into Georgia Tech, called him up and you know he was very pride of all his grandchildren going to college and continuing our family tradition and you know I said I'm going to be a engineer and he said well I don't know driving a train is exactly what I though you were going to do and that was a moment of clarity for me to understand from his vantage point exactly what an engineer was but for me going to a engineering school learning how to solve problems was a basic skill set that was transferable that I can take other places.

**Richard Warner:**

I told my grandmother I wanted to go into television and she bought me a repair manual, how are you different than your parents?

**Gena Knox:**

Well, you know my dad is a banker has been a stock broker and you know he definitely comes from a financial background and you know I utilize that and take his advice for sure on the financial end but I'm a very creative person and that's how kind of came up with the idea for our products, so that's really different for him to understand the creativity part of our business...

**Richard Warner:**

To understand the web...

**Gena Knox:**

Exactly...

**Richard Warner:**

It's a whole new platform. You know marketing and sells platform...

**Gena Knox:**

The whole marketing and sells and trying to really target your customers and just build website traffic and kind of thing is totally different from what he grew up you know doing, but I learned so much from my parents, one thing they really instilled in me and brother and sisters is work ethic and from the time I can remember I had either house chores and when I could drive I had summer jobs and after school jobs and that I think has really help me in being a entrepreneur and knowing that you know it doesn't feel like work. It's just I so enjoy it but I don't you know being an entrepreneur you're kind of you can kind of set your on schedule well...

**Richard Warner:**

Yeah as long as turns into twenty hours a day...

**Ginny Rainey:**

And if you don't have a good work ethic you know you can say I can just take off at two, but you know the way I raised you know I really put in my hours but I enjoy it I love it.

**Richard Warner:**

Stereotype the stereotype Gen X is not that level of intensity in terms of focus on career, are you the exception to the rule or is that repartition not warranted?

**Bob McNeil:**

I don't know if we're really Gen Xer's as much as we might be a hybrid, we hire a lot of young people at our company now in advertising and marketing, we have a very aggressive internship program and we get a lot of people that are just out of college and certainly the fundamental value system is company I think is evolved a little bit and perhaps our experience related back to our parents or our grandparents might have instilled a different type of work ethic. I think people are still willing to work hard but I don't think there making the same basis for their decisions today that perhaps we were when we started our careers.

**Gena Knox:**

Yeah, I will definitely agree with that.

**Richard Warner:**

Such as? What do you mean?

**Gena Knox:**

Well and I would say there certainly perception of entitlement and expectations of you know I need to do this because I earned or deserved it and certainly in my own life I had to apply myself and give a hundred and ten percent to all that I do and don't expect any handouts along the way I think a lot of people in life do things for recognition or you know what ever their focus is, and that's something that I had to learn to overcome that

you do it because you want to do good because you want to fight for the cause you want to stand up for what you believe in and really that's the true reason and if you get that recognition along the way than that just something a perk on the sidelines but not the driving force to do something.

**Richard Warner:**

I found that in the early years of hiring and managing and trying to grow people in a entrepreneurial enterprise, I was much more focus on wanting them to like working there as oppose to holding them accountable to metrics and performance , did you overcome that or do you recognize that dynamic.

**Gena Knox:**

We struggle with that everyday, I want to create a really fun work environment where my employees you know enjoy coming to work but yet you do have to hold them accountable especially if there you know like a sells role, you know you have to hold them accountable to the numbers and make sure that their reaching the sells goals every month, yet you know its kind of balance I don't want to micro-manage them where they just hate their job yet I got to hold them accountable and we try to really build a fun working environment and we got great employees, but that's probably been one of my biggest challenges with owning my own businesses is you know managing the employees the right way.

**Richard Warner:**

It's that culture, does this sound familiar?

**Bob McNeil:**

Sure I mean I think it's important you know you want to be well liked but you also want to have a good relationship with people , and sometimes you know the information you may deliver to them is not all good news but I think first and foremost you got to have a personal connection with people that work with you particularly your senior management and as it trickles down I think its also important to know what is most important to your employees, you some people will come and work for you just for money , so people work come to work for you for just an opportunity, some it my be a hybrid of both, but I try to make a personal connection , we have a mentorship program in our agency where we try to make a personal connection with everyone who's there and so we can not only feel good about what we do but hold people accountable and kind of walk that thin line. And you know the most contagious thing about a business is success, you know when your succeeding, when your experiencing profitable growth whether it's your revenue, it's your size your stature, you know people tend to want to come along, and think that's been part of what is repelled our company forward.

**Richard Warner:**

How true....go ahead.

**Ginny Rainey:**

I was just going to say for a leadership stand-point I think it's not just outlining the vision for your employees but it's also not being afraid to get down in the ditch with them and really work close as a team and do things that influence them and energize them and get them motivated.

**Richard Warner:**

Vision, you said a vision thing, what is vision in the case of each of these companies what is , I mean do you have a vision statement is that necessary, don't people just get it, we're here to make money and do good for our customers , isn't that the vision, can I invoice you?

**Ginny Rainey:**

Well, certainly we probably all have very similar visions statements but our four founding principles which are quality, service, integrity, and value are still in place and that's something we continually strive for. If the customer is not happy, than we're not happy and if we can get to a point where we have a exceptional product, the customer is very happy, than you know the good that comes along with that is that you had a very productive collaboration with your team and we're all in a great place and have been able to work together well.

**Richard Warner:**

If I was to ask somebody who worked for you what your company's vision, what's your company's purpose; will they all say the same thing?

**Bob McNeil:**

I don't think they'll all say the same thing but I think whatever they say would get you to the same point. I mean our mission and our vision are actually two different things, you know our mission statement is to start with quality, deliver with quality, and finish with success and you know so that's the commitment that we start with a quality we deliver and then to finish with success because we like to win. Our vision statement is actually to create an environment where a diverse group of people can come together and create extraordinary results and so there's a little difference, you know the mission is sort of what keeps us on track; the vision is how we actually get there.

**Richard Warner:**

Multi-cultural is African-American or do you have more...

**Bob McNeil:**

African-American, Hispanic, and Asian.

**Richard Warner:**

Vision statement when it comes to a web company, how important is that to have?

**Gena Knox:**

We actually have products that are sold in retail markets across the country so you know our vision is to really to become a household brand name and become a nationally recognized brand so...

**Richard Warner:**

Fire and Flavor.

**Gena Knox:**

Fire and Flavor so you know I think all of our employees would say you know that same thing that we really encourage our employees to use our products so that they over them and use them on a everyday basis, and can spread word and so I think they all say just that that we really want to become a nationally recognized and household brand whereas you know I'm going to cook this steak tonight, oh let me turn to Fire and Flavor to help me come up with a creative solution of cooking it.

**Richard Warner:**

Have you ever run into a brick wall, your doing this your working those eighteen hours a day because you get to choose whatever hours you want and its not working. Have you ever taken a step back and said maybe this was in your prior job, I don't know...

**Ginny Rainey:**

Well and I even say absolutely yes. Everyday I find brick walls unfortunately, apart of my role is to explore new business opportunities and I'm constantly opening new doors and saying hey can we diversify our business in this arena, on the architectural specialty metal side, so unfortunately I'm finding a lot of those but what I have to keep telling myself is it's not the failure that I find but it's how high I bounce up and learn from that experience is what matters and hopefully I can apply those challenges and opportunities and what I've learned to make you know the next door open a little wider for us.

**Richard Warner:**

If I would ever inject Welch, I would follow that line of questioning and answer because he was so focus on performance and measurement and all that, does it ever wear you out?

**Bob McNeil:**

I don't think so.

**Gena Knox:**

No I mean I think, I love my job so I can work a lot of hours before I get worn out but you know just like her I'm in sells and I do hit brick walls on daily basis if I worked so hard and I'm so close to landing a major chain and all the sudden they pull the rug out from under me and it's really not much you can do but learn from it and hope I can pitch to them next year and get that account.

**Richard Warner:**

You lose the account, what do you do, how do you learn from I mean do you go to the accounts you know really pick apart why didn't you choose us or you know is there a transparency there?

**Gena Knox:** Well you know a lot of time it's you well we didn't choose your products, we chose this companies products, so yeah I do a lot of research and you know kind of compare the companies or you its so many different factors. It can be price point or it can be we're an all natural ingredients well this chain might not really care about that so we're going to pick someone that maybe file sets cheaper but you know their products are full of artificial ingredients and preservatives. You know that's not my philosophy and that's not what I live by so I'm not even going to try to move my company towards that direction so that accounts not for me its not in as you know as the all natural healthy products that trend grows than hopefully they'll move onto our team next year.

**Bob McNeil:**

Gen brings up a great point about doing the proper homework to determine is that the right opportunity for you, you know we have a relative successful winning track work to winning business or growing market chair for our clients but one of the things that we change in the way that we do business about two years ago is that we really set back and said you know it great to have opportunity, it great to have a lot of customers but what if we had a few customers that we did a really good job for and so we started to try to do...

**Richard Warner:**

Did you shrink?

**Bob McNeil:**

We shrank in the total number of customers...

**Richard Warner:**

Did you shrink in revenue as a result in doing that?

**Bob McNeil:**

We grew in revenue actually larger than we have ever grown before and it all came to sort of right sizing our agency, instead of having sort of a lot of little customers, we decided we wanted to have a few really big customers. Now there's risk in that proposal, for example one of our big customers is Wachovia, well on Tuesday Wachovia became Citi-Bank, today there's Wells Fargo.

**Richard Warner:**

Wells Fargo except there's a law-suit over it.

**Bob McNeil:**

That's true...

**Richard Warner:**

About the time this airs it's going to be one bank so.

**Bob McNeil:**

Who knows right, but the bottom line is we were able to get deeper relationships with the few customers that we chose were right for our agency and right there's so many knocks on our door to do business we actually step back and take sometimes three or four days to really try understand who are these people, what are their philosophy, are their core values similar to ours, would we have good chemistry together, we go out on a date you know we want to know hey is that somebody you really like to invite to your house over for dinner, is it somebody that you like to call an external member of your family and that's made a big difference in our business.

**Richard Warner:**

I mean that's great on paper, it's got to be hard in practice to say no?

**Bob McNeil:**

It takes a lot of time but you know we had a lot of practice.

**Richard Warner:**

That sound familiar Gena?

**Ginny Rainey:** Absolutely, I say the foundation of what we do is based on relationships. You know the old saying of it's not what you know but who you know and I think it's very much alive today and it's my job and responsibility today to get in front of folks and to attempt to connect with them and work with them on a regular basis, I might get the door closed on one opportunity but certainly want them to remember us and in the event or hopes that we can provide a service to them in the future.

**Richard Warner:**

You're head of sales so it makes sense that you would say that. You'll be the CEOs, to what extent is sales the driver of your job description?

**Bob McNeil:**

About a third for me, a third of my job is actually selling and marketing our agency, a third of it is managing our day to day business, and actually trying to find right size opportunities for us so working with our existing customers.

**Richard Warner:**

You used right size and when I hear right size I think of Office Space the movie where they're laying people off, that's not what you're saying?

**Bob McNeil:**

No, I'm saying sitting down with our existing customers, understanding the core fundamental values that we have, the core fundamental products that currently provide them, if it makes sense or if there are growth opportunities.

**Richard Warner:** Gena, sells?

**Gena Knox:**

I actually a lot of sells, I do all the corporate accounts for our business so I'm head of the sells department and CEO. We are slowly building a inside sells team to call on some of our smaller accounts on a daily basis to check in but I spend a large portion of my day calling on major grocery chains and you know building those relationships with the buyers, flying to see them and present my products or just say hello, so I do a lot of sells but that's one of the things I really enjoy about business because it's easy when you have...

**Richard Warner:**

How many people do you have?

**Gena Knox:**

Maybe about twenty employees, but its easy to sell our product that you created and so passionate about, and who there to sell it than the creator so.

**Richard Warner:**

That goes into it and I guess that probably comes even back to question about do you ever get beat up and tired and question why your doing this. It does come down to passion which is another word true believe in what you do, passionate I would imagine is the important ingredient of them all.

**Gena Knox:**

Absolutely.

**Ginny Rainey:**

Yeah.

**Bob McNeil:**

Absolutely, and you got to do things to renew your passion I mean I took a sabbatical for three weeks a month ago, I try to take one every five years, I try to go back to school, be in a executive level program or some sort of continuing ed about every other year, just to get back into the classroom, just to meet people who are more intelligent to and learn from them.

**Richard Warner:**

Does your management team get the same...

**Bob McNeil:**

Absolutely, we have a training development budget as apart of every one of our account groups and not just our management team but every employee in our agency gets an opportunity to go for training and development every year.

**Richard Warner:**

Giving back, another characteristic of the Gen X group that your not apart of, ya'll give back?

**Ginny Rainey:**

Absolutely, I've got a strong presence in their community which I'm very proud of. We live just off the square in the city of Marietta and it's my hometown, I'm a mile less than a mile from the home I grew up in, so I have a very strong presence in the community and really enjoy working with are church members or other organizations that I'm involved with. I think it's a critical component of balancing life and being able to give back.

**Richard Warner:**

Bob pro bono, give back?

**Bob McNeil:**

Absolutely, it's a core fundamental of our company, not only do we do it as an agency but we actually encourage our employees to do it personally. I believe that you know to much is given, much is expected from and we donate services for example to National Black Arts Festival every year, The American Institute for managing diversity, we try to plan of our quarterly staff activities, one that involves some sort of community service whether it's it can be money but it also can be elbow grease and there are ways we give back all the time.

**Gena Knox:**

We in addition to giving you know products to the food bank we also hire a lot of our employees through Goodwill and we use the Goodwill program in Athens. That's one of the I think the greatest pleasures of owning your own business is that you can employ people in the community and provide jobs and knowing that their supporting their family because of your company and we've we used a program through Goodwill where we hire temporary and then move into permanent positions.

**Richard Warner:**

Three of Georgia Trends Forty under Forty congratulations to all of you and thanks for being with us, this was awesome stuff and thank you for watching this week, you can catch a replay of this show in Atlanta on the radio WCFO that's 1160 AM., you can listen on iTunes just search on Georgia's Business and you can also send off to me directly online at RichardWarner.com and now for all of us at Georgia Public Broadcasting I'm Richard Warner and until next week thanks for watching and don't sell yourself short. Did you miss one of our Georgia Business broadcasts or would you like to see one again, maybe you liked to get a transcript of a recent show, that and more are available as near by as your personal computer. To check out our video archive and more information head to the internet and log on to our website at [gpb.org/georgiasbusiness](http://gpb.org/georgiasbusiness). Have a guest idea or would you like to comment on a recent episode, contact us here on Georgia's Business, our e-mail address is Georgia's Business at [gpb.org](mailto:gpb.org) or give us a call at 404-685-2461