

Hire to bolster your soft spots

Carole Howe's strengths lie in her imaginative concepts: tickle-your-fancy ideas that brought shops like Bow Wow Meow, Field & Stream and Fly Babies into airport concourses.

But Howe, founder and president of the specialty retail group that operates Creative Kidstuff, The Paradies Shops and other successful airport retail franchises, admits that she isn't much of a planner.

"I've never mapped anything out on paper," says Howe, whose company has been growing willy-nilly since the mid-'90s. "I've always shot from the hip."

That's why she hired Jim Stelten as chief operating officer in 2000. He brought a strategic approach to growth and marketing, and the company really began to take off. Between 2001 and 2003, its revenues grew more than 50 percent, to \$20.6 million.

Stelten's strategy centers on opening more stores in the company's existing airport markets and partnering with huge competitor Host International to acquire more space at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, CBR's home base. The small retailer started opening 10 stores a year and now operates in 12 airports.

The arrival of Stelten let Howe quit running the whole enterprise herself and focus instead on the creative side: anticipating hot retail trends and developing boutiques. The airport's business developer says that if she wanted to open a fly-swatter store, he'd probably let her do it.

Lesson: Be honest in appraising your strengths and weaknesses. Then, play to your strengths, and look to hire people who have excelled in the areas you have not.

— Adapted from "Women Leading Growth 50 Companies," Twin Cities Bizwomen.com, *The Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal*.