

Fresh Ideas delivered naturally

On the heels of a 73 percent revenue jump, Boulder agency lands Whole Foods account

By Mike Taylor

Just past the entryway of The Fresh Ideas Group is the main room, not a lobby or a boardroom but a kitchen with a large butcher-block table surrounded by six cushioned stools, and coffee or tea brewing on the counter.

Sylvia Tawse, president and founder of the 10-year-old Boulder-based communications firm, says she designed it that way not only for sampling clients' products, but because the kitchen is where people naturally gather to talk.

And listen.

Though she's in the business of speaking for others, Tawse did as much listening as she did talking in the past year with regard to her own company, which specializes in representing companies and interests in the natural-products industry. After years of incremental growth that roughly mirrored the industry she represents, Tawse created a senior adviser group in January 2006 to help her plot her business' future.

She credits that group with helping her firm generate a 73 percent revenue jump last year over the previous year, to \$970,000, and increasing her firm's client base from 12 to 21. She also doubled her staff, from five to 10, to put the firm in a "state of readiness" for more business.

"They really guided me to decide, 'Syl, it's not really just about this year. Where do you want to be 10 years from now?'" Tawse says of the advisory group. "And that led to a commitment to growing the agency in the next three to five years into a mid-size agency. It was really like giving myself permission to grow and to grow pretty swiftly versus kind of staying the same size."

The advisory group includes Paul Repetto, who co-founded Horizon Organic Dairy in 1991; business coach Larry Bangs; Tawse's chief financial officer Jim Locatelli, and her husband, Lyle Davis.

"These are all people who know me really well and will be brutally honest with me," Tawse says. "But they're really keen business minds as well."

Tawse's firm took a giant stride toward more growth in February when Whole Foods Market named Fresh Ideas Group its agency of record for the Rocky Mountain region, just weeks after the upscale natural-foods retailer announced it was acquiring Boulder-based Wild Oats.

It made sense that Whole Foods would look to Boulder and to someone with a long record of devotion to the natural-products industry. This is a prosperous but pivotal time for organic and natural foods, and especially for Whole Foods, the industry leader with annual revenues of more than \$5 billion.

Only a few years ago, the organics industry was regarded as a fringe player and garnered minimal coverage from the mainstream media. But with 20 percent growth per year the past decade spearheaded by Whole Foods, critics have taken aim on the market leader and asked whether company growth has come at the expense of strict organic ideals such as supporting local producers to shorten the distribution distance.

Whole Foods is acutely aware of the questioning. In early February, the company hosted an all-day seminar at the Belmar Center in Lakewood to instruct and encourage area farmers and other food producers on how to become Whole Foods suppliers. With Fresh Ideas Group hired to help coordinate the event, the seminar drew 130 attendees.

A few weeks later, Tawse's agency was named Whole Foods' agency of record for the region encompassing a total of 10 stores in Colorado, New Mexico and Kansas, plus Utah and Idaho, where leases have been signed but stores haven't yet opened. The contract is for six months, to be reviewed at the end of that period.

"Sylvia is uniquely tuned in to the farmers and growers of our region," said Cathy Cochran-Lewis, director of marketing for Whole Foods' Rocky Mountain region. "She has so much vision, and she's just specialized in organics and natural foods for so long, so it was just a natural fit for us.

"We're overcoming this idea of a big corporate image when in fact we operate independently as these smaller regions," Cochran-Lewis said.

The contract with Whole Foods, on the heels of its announced buyout of Wild Oats, also completes an interesting circle for Tawse, who got her start in marketing in the early 1990s with Alfalfa's, one of the Front Range's original natural-foods grocers that later was acquired by Wild Oats. While at Alfalfa's, Tawse also met and later married Lyle Davis, one of Alfalfa's co-founders. Today, they live on and operate a 35-acre organic farm in Longmont that produces fresh-cut flowers and specialty vegetables for sale at area farmers' markets.

Tawse, 47, suggests that launching a marketing firm specializing in natural products was the culmination of all her professional interests and talents. After earning bachelor's degrees in English and education, she taught high school English for two years and later operated her own restaurant and catering service in Pueblo. Alfalfa's, one of the original large healthy-lifestyle grocers, hired her as food-service director at its Littleton store.

But she wore other hats at the fledgling grocer. Her marketing talents were illustrated when Hass Hassan, another Alfalfa's co-founder, asked her to come up with a message to put on the store's paper sacks to promote organic foods.

"That's kind of a writing challenge because of the small space, and who's going to really read a grocery bag?" says Tawse, whose message — "the top 10 reasons to support organics" — hit home with enough impact that 15 years later it is still widely disseminated all over the Internet, usually but not always properly credited to her.

"That just taught me we had to take these kind of big, looming issues and really bring them into digestible bites," Tawse says. "Also, that we had to balance our passion and our fervor with science. So every one of those 10 reasons had a third-party source. It wasn't just 'preserve topsoil.' It was 'according to the USDA, 40 million tons of topsoil is lost each year....'"

Looking back on her start as a marketer in the natural-products field, Tawse says, "I was really lucky to be in the place that I was at the time. At the same time the country was looking at its health, it was also looking at how to improve food as part of your lifestyle. And natural grocery stores were one of the solutions."

After a stint as director of marketing for Alfalfa's, Tawse left to become PR director for the Colorado Music Festival. She held that post for three years before leaving to partner with Lisa Bell in launching The Fresh Ideas Group in 1997. Bell left to pursue other career interests in 2001.

Repetto, the Horizon Organic Dairy co-founder, has been a longtime business ally of Tawse, having convinced her to take the PR post with the Colorado Music Festival when he was president of that nonprofit's board, and later encouraging her to start her own marketing firm specializing in serving natural-product interests.

"She's been on all sides of it, from running a restaurant to being a part of Alfalfa's," says Repetto, who now serves as a general partner at Greenmont Capital Partners, a Boulder-based private equity firm launched in 2004 that focuses on emerging natural-products companies. "So she knows the business from the ground up. She can be very helpful to new companies and companies as they grow, because often as not she'd been there, done that."

Whole Foods hopes she can be as helpful for a company that began as a vegetarian co-op in Austin, Texas, in 1978 and that some now criticize for becoming too big. Repetto is familiar with such charges. His own Horizon Organic Dairy was acquired by multinational giant Dean Foods in 2003.

"I think there always has been the feeling that organic somehow equated with small, but of course it doesn't anymore," Repetto says. "Whole Foods is a \$5-plus billion dollar retailer. It's a challenge, but there are also terrific opportunities just to continue to communicate with large numbers of people. The business 15 years ago was tiny. Bigness is certainly not seen as either a disadvantage or something bad by people who are buying the products. Because they're buying 15 to 20 percent more of them every year."

Like the natural-products industry for many years, Tawse's firm has existed somewhat under the radar outside of the natural-products sector, barely missing out on the ColoradoBiz Top 100 Women-Owned Company ranking the last three years, placing No. 102 twice and No. 103 once, missing this year's top 100 by a mere \$55,000 in revenues.

Tawse's plan is to keep growing with the industry she's been supporting since it was a tiny, counterculture movement. The biggest challenge she sees ahead: "I think it's to be true to the vision, to grow organic with integrity, unapologetically," she says. "Organic is the biggest food revolution that has happened, I believe, in our lifetime. Now, prior to that, it probably would have been what used to be called the Green Revolution, which was World War II, you know, 'Yeah! Power pesticides!'

"One of the easiest ways people can make a difference is how they vote with their grocery dollars, how they vote with their clothing dollars, how they vote with the type of food they eat when they eat out," Tawse says. "If we all started not waiting just for the November election to make the big decisions but we voted for a cleaner food economy, we'd make a big difference.

"Colorado, and Boulder in particular, is a real epicenter for rethinking our own personal economies to benefit the planet. You don't have to be a Democrat or a Republican to view it that way."