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# VBR

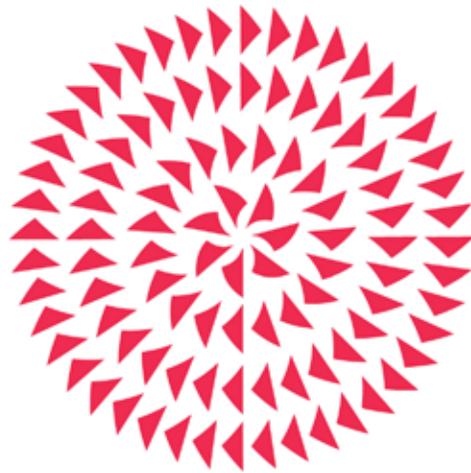
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# Truly Communicating With Technology

In this technology-driven world, we have a plethora of methods to connect to one another: cell phone, email, text, land line phone (yes, it still exists.) But, are we communicating more efficiently than we did 20 years ago?

Only a short time ago, cell phones and the Internet weren't a part of our lives. Many of you remember pay phones and pagers. Wow! Ancient memory, right? Well, not that ancient. If you were on the road and had to contact a client or check back in to the office, you pulled over to use a pay phone to either reach a live person or leave your pager number only to pull off a few exits later after the call was returned to your pager. If you're too young to have experienced this, you're enjoying the "spoiled life."

I remember we contacted each other less, but it seems like those calls meant more. In many ways, more was accomplished. The appointment was made, important data was exchanged, a "yes" or "no" was given, approval on a project was granted and business was conducted. Today, many calls, emails, text, etc. are not answered, direct questions go unattended, business matters are skipped and production could be suffering. Are we communicating less with more? It sure seems that way at times. Sometimes, our communication through

PDA's is less efficient than the "old" method of land lines and facsimiles. Why is this part of our recent business culture?

Convenience and availability. Because we can, we do. It's easy to screen a call, and put in our phone calendar to return that email later, but are we taking care of business in a time efficient, cost-effective manner? Eventually we get so busy, we never get back to those calls and emails. Somehow, the business culture is practicing a principle that we all preach against; that answering a call is not important, replying to a client or vendor within a reasonable amount of time is unnecessary. This "delayed communication" is sort of anti-new technology, right?

Remember the days when you called a prospect from the office phone and spoke with the decision maker or at least with that person's administrative assistant, scheduled an appointment and the appointment was kept? Remember when you arrived on time, you presented your product or service and a few days later, followed up and got a "yes" or "no"? Especially with today's technology, these essential points of business practice should be a given. Sometime between yesterday's technology and now with more ways to contact each other than we could have ever imagined 20 years

ago, we've missed the boat. Have we overloaded our plate with more than we can possibly do within a given amount of time, or have we lost sight of the importance of communication?

I challenge us to return to the fundamentals of what cell phones, email access and even land line phones were invented to do - communicate with one another. A simple rule is: Receive, Review, Reply. In today's business world, this concept is just as important to business as the 4 Ps: Product, Price, Place, Promotion.

We are truly blessed in this country and in this time of history to own, manage and lead businesses. Passing along the art of communication to our staff and our colleagues is not a reinvention of the wheel; it's just good business.

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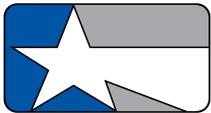



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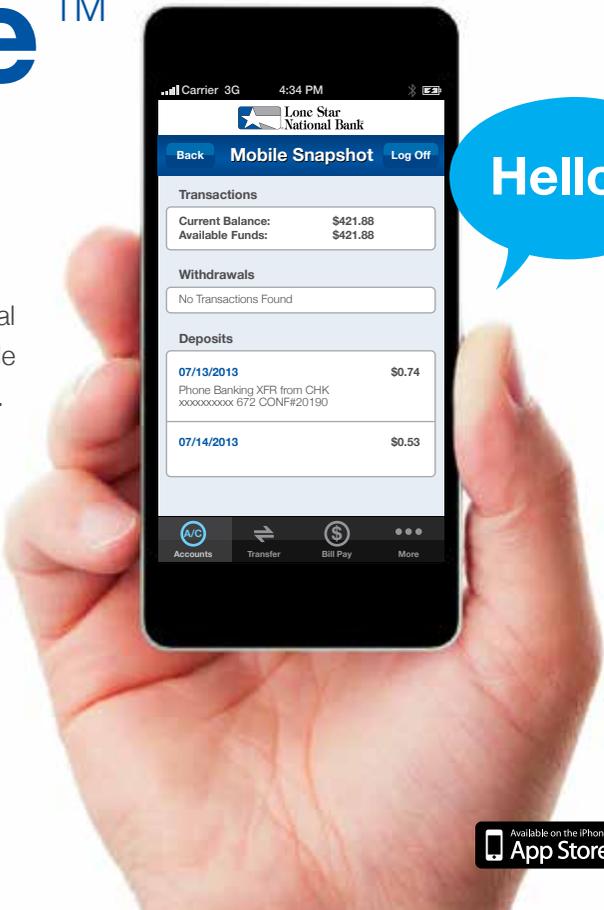
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# More Than Pumping Iron: Getting Fit

By Lori Vermaas

At the turn of the millennium, the U.S. fitness industry was on the cusp of a huge growth decade. Young adults in the 18–34-year-old range drove membership, helping to make it the fastest-growing job market by 2006. Large gyms, of more than 10,000 square feet, studded with endless rows of Nautilus equipment and treadmills, dotted the typical upscale suburban landscape. In recent years, however, the robust \$20-billion-plus industry has undergone rapid redefinition, and the Valley is keeping pace.

Gone are the days of acquiring physical conditioning solely via stationary equipment. The trend that sustains the industry is integrated workouts. Mind-body programs such as yoga, Pilates, and personalized sessions that stress functional training are popular not only in the larger fitness centers, but in more intimate, specialized studios located across the Valley.

There's more to **Ultimate Fitness** than people using exercise bikes and elliptical trainers, although the Weslaco gym contains a vast array. After all, at 21,000 square feet, the facility is warehouse-sized. But this is not a corporate gym, it's a full-service health club that offers 15-20 different classes each month. Fitness is a holistic process for Weslaco native Jason Martinez, who founded the business in 2004. "We don't want our members to get bored doing the same routine. We want them to try out different things, so their bodies don't get accustomed to one workout." Some of the specialized classes include the ever-popular Boot Camp, spinning and boxing.

Martinez has stayed ahead of the curve by catering to as many different age groups as possible, including seniors. In fact, his gym was the first in the Valley to offer Silver Sneakers, a low-impact exercise class for seniors that improves range-of-motion issues. With the addition last year of another called Silver Fit, the classes have grown "tremendously," averaging about 30 participants, he said.

Owner/instructor Tanya Miller offers popular and highly intense 55-minute group sessions at **My Body Pilates**, which opened in Harlingen in 2014. "I've been very maxxed out," said Miller, whose weekly clientele has more than doubled.

There's a hunger for these types of classes in the Valley and the integrated workouts they offer, but she has noticed that proficient teaching is in short supply. "No one has really exposed all of this yet down here," Miller said, in that Pilates isn't a stop-in, drop-in type of exercise class. It takes commitment and time

to learn how to do all the routines properly. A rehabilitation therapy that originated during World War I by Joseph Pilates, the practice integrates mind, body movement and breath with clients performing up to 34 sequences (of holds and small repetitions) that seamlessly transition from one position to another.

Properly done, the sessions are intense, requiring precise body control and breathing patterns. There's no music. "Breath sets the rhythm," said Miller, who has just expanded her studio. "It allows you to find the rhythm of each exercise, of each movement."



Aziza Barker, right with other Laguna Madre Yoga instructors, said the fitness she promotes "incorporates body, mind and spirit," a process that teaches how to address injury and its compensation. (VBR)

*Tanya Miller of My Body Pilates added two more Reformers, the multi-use Pilates device that provides differing levels of resistance on a flat bed or a mobile carriage. "With Pilates you're lengthening and strengthening muscles at the same time, not bulking them up. People say they feel sore in places they never knew they had muscles in, especially in their sides and their abdominal/pelvic area." (VBR)*

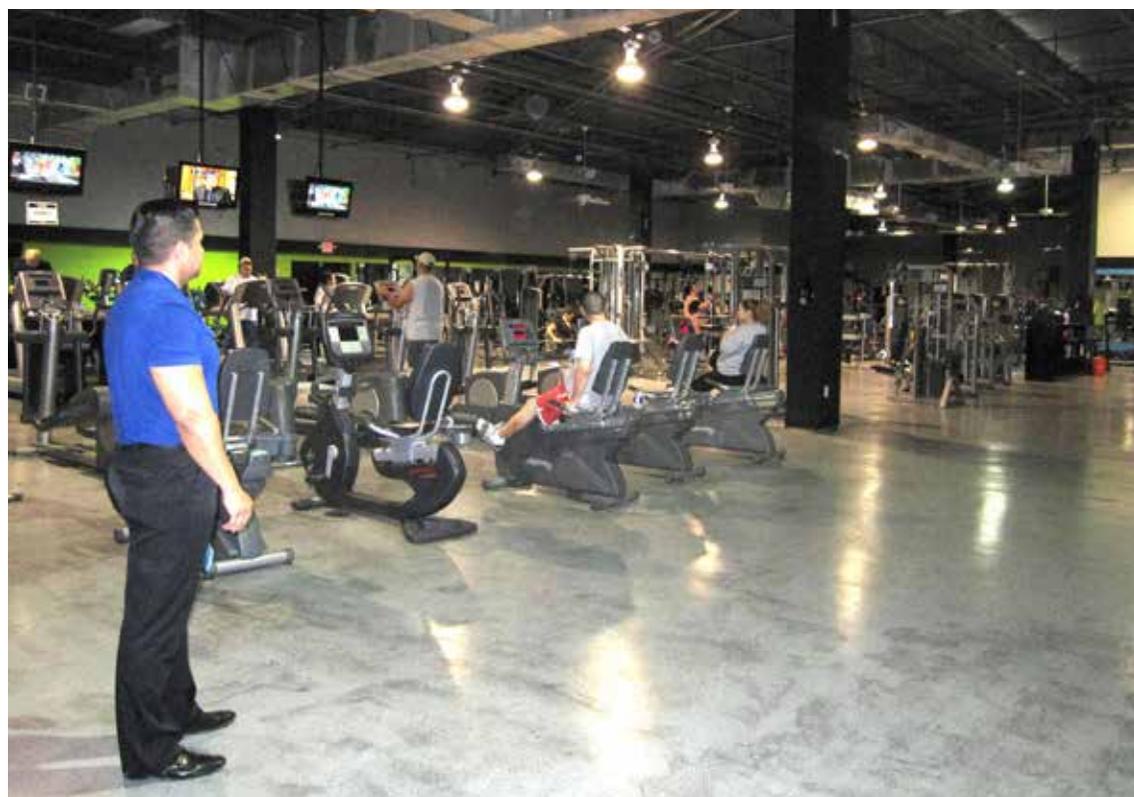


CrossFit produces "insane results," says Ray Garcia, owner of **EBT CrossFit** in Brownsville, which opened in 2011. "Some of our athletes have lost over 150 pounds in nine months." A sports and fitness program that integrates 20-minute, intense workouts consisting of a variety of exercise moves and equipment, CrossFit has descended on the Valley in the past few years. "Our members are a good mix, ages 12-63, though most are women and men in their mid-late 20s." Garcia, a cardiovascular registered nurse, discovered the practice after attending a seminar at an MMA tournament. "I fell in love right away with it."

Since EBT opened, it's been nonstop for Garcia, even though he didn't do any serious marketing. "Word of mouth just about blew it up. I started with 12 and now have about 140 members." Along with adopting healthy eating, members must learn the proper mechanics for each exercise, which typically incorporate functional movements. The discipline is very challenging, in that it integrates sports moves, like those from gymnastics and Olympic weight lifting. But trainers tailor every workout to each member's abilities and goals.

When Jorge Vela opened his personal training business, **Explosive Fitness**, in McAllen in 2003, he implemented a more proactive style of training, one less focused on building

up muscles than upgrading clients' overall medical health. Highlighted by the use of the TRX System, where the body provides resistance and becomes the main equipment needed, he has helped to improve



*The Ultimate Fitness facility encompasses more than 18,000 square feet. "I knew we had to open something bigger and better than what McAllen had, to bring people over here," said owner and certified personal trainer Jason Martinez. (VBR)*

the general mobility of numerous customers. "We don't want lifetime clients, we want them to become self-sufficient when it comes to fitness."

Along with challenging workouts, Vela's sessions emphasize learning, particularly about the role of nutrition and how to incorporate regimens that exert every major muscle group through real-world activity, like lifting an object while in a bent-over position. These routines involve a lot of core work and the use of portable devices, like Physioballs. "At their jobs, people go to meetings or travel in their car. So they're sitting all day. Why bring them to a gym where they'll be sitting while exercising?"

"I love movement," said Aziza Barker, owner of **Laguna Madre Yoga Meditation and Dance Center** on South Padre Island. "I think of my studio as a place to come in and explore movement." Founded in 2005, Barker's island enterprise has become more than just a yoga studio, offering ample opportunity for clients to investigate their body's range of motion. She interconnects different disciplines, offering classes in yoga and dance, wellness-themed workshops, and massage therapy sessions. "We emphasize physical postures and breath work to align the mind, to keep oneself in balance."

Barker, who is also a massage therapist, first started teaching yoga on the island in 1987. "There were not a lot of yoga studios in the Valley then, certainly not on the

A class at Laguna Madre Yoga Meditation and Dance Center practices the bow posture. Yoga fitness incorporates body, mind and spirit. (VBR)



island.” When maintaining the mobile business became more challenging, she opened the studio. “We needed a home base. We were tired of moving our equipment around.”

With more and more medical professionals beginning to trust alternative therapies, Barker has become “really excited about what’s going on in the fitness industry. There’s much more communication between yoga teachers addressing physical issues with the medical pro-

fession. So there’s a dialogue happening in those worlds.”

For more information, see [mybodypilatesstudio.com](http://mybodypilatesstudio.com); [ebtcrossfit.com](http://ebtcrossfit.com); [explosivefitness.net](http://explosivefitness.net); [lagunamadreyoga.com](http://lagunamadreyoga.com) and [ufcrgv.com](http://ufcrgv.com) for Ultimate Fitness Center.



To train his clients at Explosive Fitness, Jorge Vela prefers the TRX System, a bodyweight exercise program that relies on the use of straps to leverage gravity. (VBR)



EBT CrossFit owner Ray Garcia has been into fitness since high school and the army, where he did workouts similar to CrossFit. (VBR)

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# Stargate 1: Rocket Science and the RGV

By Eileen Mattei

Are you ready for the Rio Grande Valley to become the epicenter of a space-based Silicon Valley? That's a highly likely future, according to presenters at the first STARGATE Talk. The stars are, in fact, aligning to make the area near the SpaceX facility into a research and commercialization hub with a business incubator only two miles from the launch site. SpaceX, which designs, manufactures and launches advanced rockets and spacecraft, chose Boca Chica beach in part because of regional resources, which include UTB's deep space research programs and United Launch Alliance's Harlingen plant.

The future scenario is already operating, charting space waves and producing home-grown, deep space scientists. UTB researchers are exploring the galaxy through the Arecibo Remote Command Center (the world's largest radio telescope) and the Center for Advanced Radio Astronomy. Valley astrophysicists have identified over 60 new radio pulsars in recent years, accounting for more than a third of the total discoveries. So it's no surprise that UTB (soon to be UT-RGV) now collaborates with top researchers at JPL, NASA, the Max-Planck

Google developer Chris Wren provided insight on innovation and creative work at the first STARGATE Talk. (Courtesy Paul Chouy, University of Texas-Brownsville.)



Institute and other prestigious organizations.

UTB is only the university with an active agreement with a private space industry company,

said Mike Gonzalez of United Brownsville, a major participant in the public-private STARGATE enterprise. Aiming to connect students and the Valley community to new technological developments and business opportunities, STARGATE also is building momentum for a local angel investor network to back start-ups.

Irv Downing, UTB's vice president of institutional advancement and economic development, said STARGATE is fostering a culture of research, entrepreneurship and commercialization of cutting edge products. The business incubator at Boca Chica is slated to open in late 2016. "The community coming together around innovation and opportunity sets the stage for what will happen in the future." Applications to enter the incubator will be available later this year.

"SpaceX coming here is going to be a game changer for everyone. SpaceX is creating momentum," said Frederick Jenet, director of CARA. "This has been an amazing journey." He said, "'The Big Bang Theory' TV show offers an accurate glimpse at the work of astrophysicists."

Google, too, has taken an interest in the Valley's space surge. Christopher Wren, who helped develop Google's Android system UI, spoke on "Innovation and Creative Work" as the inaugural speaker of STARGATE Talks.

"How does innovation work?" asked Wren, who worked at MIT labs. Under the old model, it took about 10 years from the start of research to a product reaching market. The tra-

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jectory of a project -- funding from a government source to researching and innovation at a university and finishing with a company manufacturing and marketing a product -- has altered and added corporate funding of research, he said.

Now prototypes/startups are part of the process, and feedback between the segments is a given. To successfully innovate takes, first, a base of technical excellence, second, the capability to communicate ideas and bounce them off others, and then the production, Wren explained. The motto attached to this model is "Demo or die" -- show how the innovation works.

Google follows a model of innovation in the trenches, which extends from exposure to real problems and trust in production team members to access to the tools of production. What attracted Wren to Google was the access to tools. "Everyone is responsible for production. Everyone is thinking about what they really need. You have to have people with tech skills, the curiosity to learn, able to communicate."

At the center of the innovation pie chart is flexibility, Wren said. Other essential traits for an innovative company are clarity, authenticity, broad competency, deep expertise, curiosity and humility. "You can't do it all by yourself."

Wren reviewed what he had learned from one major failure. "Failure isn't bad in innovation settings. It's much better to have tried and failed."

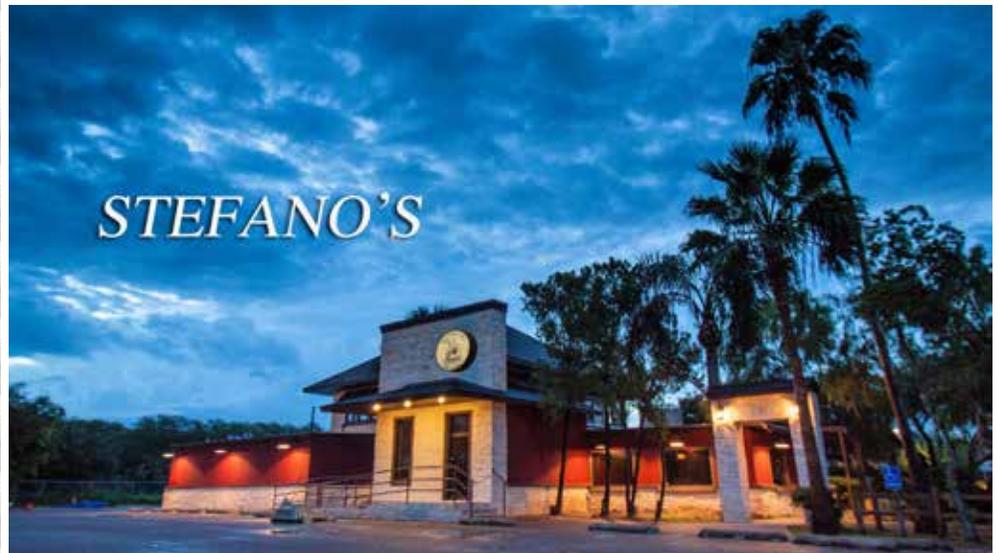
Innovation is what has made Google powerful, Wren said. They looked at how people interacted and searched, at links and at inbound traffic. The company strives to bring the message right to the user. An enormous expansion is underway at Google, he added, making the environment more responsive. "It's not just devices anymore."

*For more information, see [unitedbrownsville.com/stargetetalks](http://unitedbrownsville.com/stargetetalks).*



# A Slice of Brooklyn

Dine-In . Carry out . Delivery



Established in 2012 Stefano's Brooklyn Pizza has been serving the Rio Grande Valley with great Brooklyn style pizzas, calzones & subs, and pasta dishes. Stefano's is the home of the 30" inch pizza. We invite you to try our classic Italian cuisine, made fresh daily (never frozen or microwaved) and cooked in four Masal & Sons brick ovens. Come enjoy lunch or dinner in the fully renovated 10,000 sq. ft. restaurant (the former Lone Star BBQ building), with an additional 4,000 sq. ft. outdoor patio. Stefano's Brooklyn Pizza is officially endorsed by world famous Italian chef, Santo Bruno.

Stefano's proudly employs 82 local people as chefs, servers and support staff, all under the direction of general manager, Graham Smith, who received his Restaurant & Hotel Management degree from Texas Tech and graduated from the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in Napa Valley, California. Smith's many years in the restaurant industry compliments the Stefano's tradition - this restaurant belongs to the community and is here to serve the Rio Grande Valley. All employees are adequately trained and are dedicated to a true, dining experience. Room for over 400 guests, inside and out, your taste buds for the best in Italian food and a full bar will certainly be more than satisfied. The full menu also includes steak and seafood, also prepared fresh and made daily. And if you're picking up lunch or dinner for the family, or for a business meeting, that's fine too with a separate to-go area.

Future plans include expanding the existing event room, online ordering and continue supporting local young people by sponsoring employees with college books and other educational necessities. Stefano's is a community restaurant, aimed at delivering just what the Rio Grande Valley demanded - a larger, more accommodating restaurant with the finest in classic Italian cuisine. Come celebrate May Grand Opening Month and in the months to come. We're here for you, and here to stay.

Thank you,  
*Steve*

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# Incubation Time

By Lori Vermaas

Sergio Adame, founder of API Real Estate, wanted to create a little bit of buzz in the Harlingen business community. After realizing that some prospective businesses were having trouble starting up because of financial issues, he decided to offer office space in the Bank of America building that his firm owns. "I was thinking that if a start-up doesn't have money, you give them a space for free or at half-price, so they can make money; then they can pay the rent. I could give them six months, and then reanalyze their business plan with them. You never know where local talent will come from." But he didn't want to offer the deal to just any enterprise. "It had to be a from-scratch corporation, where you've just received your articles of incorporation within the past two months. You also had to have a bank account."

A little over a year later, the buzz hasn't been dramatic, but one of the first four businesses to be incubated has moved on to bigger and better digs. Texas Scholars Magazine, which profiles the state's school districts, now operates upstate. "They weren't a large outfit, but they grew. The owner landed a big contract in Dallas or San Antonio, and moved up

there. It was really nice to see them blossom and take off," said Adame. Other tenants have included an engineer, a fresh-out-of-college CPA and an insurance agency -- appropriate fits in the intimate offices, whose size ranges from 700-1600 square feet. "It pretty much allows room for a desk and a chair."

The community venture is the first type of start-up outreach that Adame's done. He'd like to see it grow, although he understands he's in a unique situation. "We know that not a lot of landlords are interested in something like this. They don't have the privilege of having such a large space as we do here." Indeed, although he has space for up to 15 start-ups, it's negotiable. "If a solvent business comes in and wants office space -- maybe they want to rent an entire floor, for example -- the start-up will need to move elsewhere in the building. But we'll help them move, including updating their business cards."

Having started out green himself in the real estate field nearly 10 years ago, Adame knows well the

*This attorney's office is a long-term API tenant in the Bank of America building in Harlingen. (VBR)*



challenges of establishing a business. He began by helping his family with some property acquisitions after following his parents' advice to get a real estate license. "I never thought I'd be doing this kind of work. I remember watching a real estate agent trying to find my parents a home and thought to myself, 'I hate selling. I'm never going to do this.' But lo and behold, 10 years later, here I am running my own company

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with a couple of other agents.”

A certified commercial investment member and broker since 2011, Adame closes on more than just residential deals. His agency provides consulting services and leases, and manages and sells properties, all in a wide range of categories, including residential, commercial, industrial and land. But he tends to focus on commercial properties the most. That focus precipitated his company’s rebranding in 2014, from Adame Properties Inc. to API Real Estate. “I noticed that a lot of commercial firms use initials in their name. It’s always three letters. It gave it a more corporate feel.”

The projects of which he’s most proud are those that involve him from the beginning, what he calls “off-the ground construction projects, where I select the space, organize its construction, lease it and then see it get busy.” A recent favorite of his, Riverside Plaza in Mission (2012), is starting to thrive, especially with more tenants moving in. “That is the biggest satisfaction in the world. The landlord is succeeding, the tenants are succeeding; I have this good, whole-hearted feeling to say, ‘I did that,’ that I helped build it from the ground up.”

With Hidalgo County becoming a hot real estate area, especially Edinburg, which he thinks will become “better than McAllen” if city

planners maintain their current development-plan trajectory, Adame anticipates experiencing more of that good feeling. In the meantime, hopefully a few more prospective professionals will try out his free office space experiment. “As agents we’re here to represent people. We don’t act on their behalf. They make their own decisions,” but improving communities, especially in low-income areas like the Valley, requires a special kind of vision. “Most people don’t understand that it takes money to make money. You can’t be in this for yourself, but for your community. You need to see the bigger picture.”

*For more information, see [apirealestate.us](http://apirealestate.us).*

*Sergio Adame never expected to become a real estate agent. He’s transacted hundreds of property deals across the state and decided to offer startups reduced rents. (VBR)*



# The City of Raymondville and the Raymondville EDC

## ...Encouraging Business Development!



Left to right: Juan Figueroa, Flooring Management Consultants; Belinda Guzman, Heaven Lee Sent; Frank Solis, Solis Realty (others not pictured.)

The City of Raymondville Economic Development Corporation has established the Raymondville Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) Program with the assistance of the United States Department of Agriculture USDA Rural Development. This portion of the RLF is comprised of funds that were granted to the City by USDA and matched by the city through sales tax revenues.

**The following businesses have received or are in the process of receiving a Small Business Revolving Loan.**

- Juan Figueroa - Flooring Management Consultants*
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# A Conversation With...

## Edna Posada

By Eileen Mattei

In the midst of Spa La Posada's serene ambiance -- soft lighting, soothing new age music, a trickling waterfall and slightly scented air -- Edna Posada has her laptop open taking care of business while she gets a pedicure. "People think all Edna does is get manis, pedis and massages, but I run a business. I was born to do this."

Posada experienced her first spa when she went to California shortly after she launched her Merle Norman cosmetic franchise, and brought the spa concept back to the Valley. "I didn't realize there was a place you could go to relax," she said. Eventually Posada integrated spa amenities into her Merle Norman stores in McAllen and Harlingen.

"Some of our biggest challenges give us opportunities to grow," said Posada, recalling the changes that gave birth to the spa. "You can't look at challenges as something that could bring you down. You have to learn to get up off the floor and put on your big girl panties."



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"We women take our businesses very seriously, usually looking at a business like a second family and focusing on relationships," said Posada. But she realized that while you may like some of your vendors more than others, it all comes down to the bottom line. "It was an eye opener for me, to detach myself and look beyond the relationships. That forced me to become a better business person. I feel strongly that business is business, whether you're selling lipsticks or tractors. The same principles apply."

Posada admits to being a natural workaholic. Between her father and brother, both entrepreneurs, and her early employer and mentor Gene Moody, she learned how to be self-employed.

When her McAllen store appeared to be running smoothly, Posada felt that she needed a challenge. She opened a Harlingen store and five years later had a Brownsville location. Then she expanded into the spa business and then added an in-house boutique and then a barber shop. "I seem to work better that way -- juggling them all. I have a hard time doing nothing."

At staff meetings, Posada listens to suggestions from her 32 employees and incorporates them in operating procedures. "If there is a better, easier, faster, less expensive way to do things, let's do it. They are the ones dealing directly with clients, and they have really good ideas. We want our customers to be happy." She makes a point of explaining to staff why any changes are being made. Spa La Posada conducts client surveys, and she or her managers go over them with staff. "We get great comments, and our amazing staff ends up feeling more appreciated." She has heard long-time employees tell new hires, "You're never going to find another place that cares as much about you."

If Posada thinks of herself as a role model, it's for business owners, not as a make-up maven. "One of the things I strive to do is encourage women to be their own kind of woman. You should be true to yourself. You don't have to be high maintenance. Each woman has her own beauty."

Posada, exuding barely controlled energy, admitted her secret vice: naps. "I wish we would incorporate the Mexican tradition of siesta." And

Edna Posada, who believes massages are a necessity, not a luxury, has held staff meetings while getting a pedicure. (Courtesy)



the high-powered businesswoman, who starts off her day with 30 minutes of cardio, firmly believes that a massage is not luxury, but a necessity. "Medical studies prove it lowers stress and blood pressure."

When Posada, who stays attuned to her customers, noticed more men had been coming into the McAllen salon, she asked them why. "The response was always the same: we were professional and clean," she said. And so she created a men's division that is not a typical barbershop with trendy haircuts. Instead, it provides traditional but modern cuts for professional men who share a preference for old-fashioned hot-lather shaves.

Posada's business philosophy includes the work hard, play hard mantra. "Sometimes you'll catch us in the back dancing around and having a good time." She rotates taking each employee to lunch to get to know them personally. "Honestly, it's back to family." In fact, her adult daughter Alexandria is the sales manager for Spa La Posada. "She's really grown into her role," said the proud mother. "I can depend on her to make a lot of the decisions I had to make before."

Posada has used that freedom to begin exploring different directions, tackling new learning curves. "I believe life is an adventure, and I'm at a different stage in my life. I feel that we can do whatever we want."

As Seen In



# ART OF THE DEAL

**Charles Clark Chevrolet Co. knows running an auto dealership business is more art than a science.**

Charles Clark Chevrolet Co. is a dynamic, expansive and expanding dealership company with 81 years of family operations history.

“We are on the go and doing a lot of modernization,” says Kirk Clark, president. “We have just accepted construction bids for our second upgrade in the last five years.”

It built a new Honda dealership and expanded its Chevrolet site, moving its entire used car lot. “This allows us to have a really substantial footprint,” Clark states.

The upgrades feature “a much more open layout and a very modern concept,” Clark says. “It has a high-tech look with lots of glass. Customers won’t be wondering what’s going on behind closed doors. There is a sense of openness and the space is laid out for maximum efficiency as to the sales, managers office and reception.” The parts department was moved west to the main building, which houses the accounting office and parts warehouse. The upgrade adds the capacity to display an additional 125 vehicles.

The new buildings feature better curb appeal to entice motorists to stop in. There is also a more balanced display. The service department is now more repair-oriented and features a quick-service lane. Charles Clark Chevrolet is also expanding into another auto site across the street, leasing a former tire center.

One secret to its success is prime location. It is located on three city blocks on the major traffic artery Business Route 83. It owns the property, which is in the center of the city with a 30 mph speed limit, which is slow enough for motorists to recognize the site.

“People know where to find us,” Clark says. The company is also upgrading its computer system.

## ACTIVE IN COMMUNITY

The Charles Clark Chevrolet team is active in the community. Clark serves on the local chamber of commerce and other boards. “My people have a real sense of community,” Clark notes. “We are a family. Not many dealerships are like ours with our family tradition.” In this family environment, thoughtfulness and respect for all is emphasized. “We have a reputation for integrity and honesty beyond what is found in the marketplace. We are looking for a good deal to offer our customers and they have the assurance that after the sale we will be there for them.”

The dealership “makes everything easy for the consumer,” especially finance and insurance. “We don’t play hocus pocus. We are there to serve,” Clark says. “After 46 years in management, I’ve seen it all.”

Its customer-centric focus seems to be paying off. “The market has been very good,” Clark says. Honda sales have increased 39 percent over the past year at the new location and Chevrolet sales are up 20 percent. “The market overall here is one of the best in the country,” Clark says.

“At Charles Clark Chevrolet in McAllen, we pride ourselves on our outstanding customer service, having won GM’s prestigious Mark of Excellence Award for the past eight years in a row,” the company says.

Kirk Clark, president of Charles Clark Chevrolet Co., is also a world-renowned artist. “The car business is my passion, but my art success has really pushed me beyond my horizons,” he says.

Clark’s most recent art show in Mexico City “was very well received,” he notes. Another one in Rome was also a hit. He is currently working on a 65-foot mural to be displayed in Kyoto, Japan along with artists from Belgium and France. His art success has led to art-related world travels.

Clark first took up painting art in the late 1980s and was buoyed by a strong local art scene. Indeed, McAllen, Texas, boasts one of the top art scenes in the nation, complete with a thriving art district. His most famous work is Atomic Jesus. Other pieces include paintings such as Soul Fragments, Satori, Shamanic Conversions and Hidden Connections.

“I hope my art touches a curious spot in your conscience,” he writes on [kirkclark.com](http://kirkclark.com). “For me, it is a very intuitive and gratifying process. May God bless and keep you.”

# Nicho's Niche: Fruits and Vegetables

By Lori Vermaas

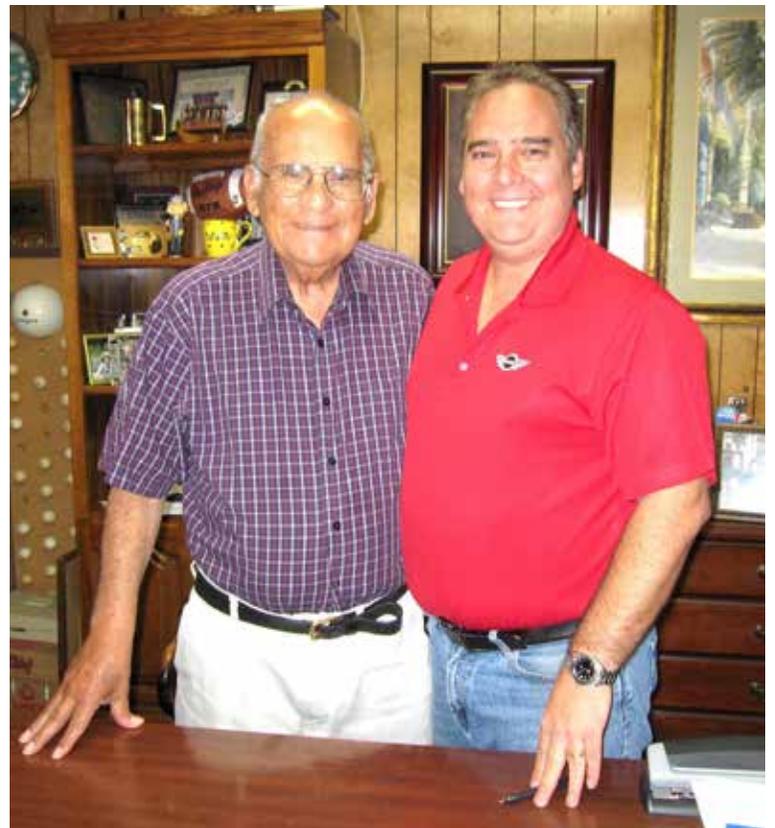
"I love working here," said Tommy Villarreal, president of Nicho Produce Company in Edinburg. "It's a thrilling environment." The wholesale company is a hive of activity, fronted by a war room of agents negotiating orders for shipments from over 500 suppliers from around the country and backed by warehouse employees loading and unloading boxes of produce, and kitchen workers moving a variety of vegetables and fruits through the fresh-cut process.

One of the oldest produce wholesalers in the Valley, Nicho was founded by Villarreal's father, Dionicio (nicknamed "Nicho"), in 1969 after he learned the produce-buying business while working for Sweeney and Company, a San Antonio grocer supplier. "We buy from everywhere, though there's a lot of import warehouses in Hidalgo," said the younger Villarreal. Buying mainly from grower-packers, who sell produce that arrives in Nicho's warehouses pre-packaged, the company built up a robust business, prompting two major expansions of its facilities to incorporate industry advances and to accommodate their clients' needs. In 1992, Nicho added rooms exclusively devoted to ba-

nana ripening. "When the bananas come into the ripening rooms, they are solid green and hard," Villarreal said. "We pour ethylene into a container, which emits as a gas into the air, speeding up the natural ripening process. So instead of taking around 7 days, the bananas take around 3 days to be ready for sale."

The other change occurred a few years ago when they began packaging some of their produce. New federal nutrition requirements, which mandate the provision of half-cup servings of vegetables to children, prompted adoption of the new service housed in the Salad Room. The chamber, cooled to a chilly 35 degrees, is equipped with a flume system, cutting machine, rinse water system, spinners, packing tables and a vacuum-sealing machine, which converts a select group of produce into single or smaller servings. Although they still provide five-pound bags and containers of sliced and diced produce, "what we're seeing in the schools is a growing trend toward smaller packaging. Schools don't have enough staff to prep food, so they want it pre-cut and ready to serve, meaning three-ounce packages of raw carrots and celery," or two-ounce bags of sliced apples, another popular item Valley schools request. The same situation is occurring in

*Nicho Produce is a family-oriented business. Along with Nicho and Tommy Villarreal, seen here in the patriarch's office, the company also has also employed Tommy's son Nicholas, whose image as a 3-year-old boy pulling a wagon emblazons the company logo. He is 16 now. (VBR)*



restaurants, Villarreal said, so the technological investment has paid off.

Nicho's development of the new packaging service elaborates on the national trend toward making available bagged salads and ready-to-eat vegetables and fruits in U.S. supermarkets. Indeed, these types of products



*Workers in the Salad Room process fresh-cut vegetables. (VBR)*

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The banana ripening room is a new addition at Nicho Produce. (VBR) Nicho Produce supplies its clients with a growing list of fruits and vegetables. (VBR)



are the produce industry's fastest-growing segment, with total retail sales projected to jump from \$6.2 billion in 2015 to nearly \$7 billion by 2018, according to some market analysts. The U.S. fresh-cut fruit and vegetable market overall is even more lucrative, estimated at \$27 billion.

Given all the customers and services Nicho provides, revenues last year peaked at \$19 million. It's no surprise that the 35,000-square-foot warehouse is a labyrinth of refrigerated rooms stuffed with all kinds of produce, including bags of coin cut carrots and vacuum-sealed broccoli florets, sacks of rice and beans, and pallets piled high with boxes filled with Washington apples, Colorado potatoes, Florida tomatoes, and Mexican avocados and chiles, to name a few.

But Villarreal has a few concerns. "We're tight in here, very tight," he said, referring to the bulging warehouse space. "We've really outgrown the Salad Room." So the facilities are undergoing further expansion. "I bought a little piece of land 50 yards from here for a new mechanics' shop. We have 33 trucks, so we're hurting for parking space, too." While the new shop space will better accommodate the shipping department, its vacancy will open up more warehouse space, allowing for the Salad Room's expansion. Villarreal was eager for the completion of the initial construction phase. He estimated that it's about halfway done.

With the renovation, Nicho will be able to improve its customer service even more, which is a company core value. "We try to accommodate our customers. If they want specif-

ic items, we'll get them. Harlingen, for example, has a fruit and vegetable program that requires mango-steen and star fruit. Well, I have a client in California I can buy that from. It's hard to make everybody

happy, but I think we do a good job."

For more information, see [nichoproduce.com](http://nichoproduce.com).

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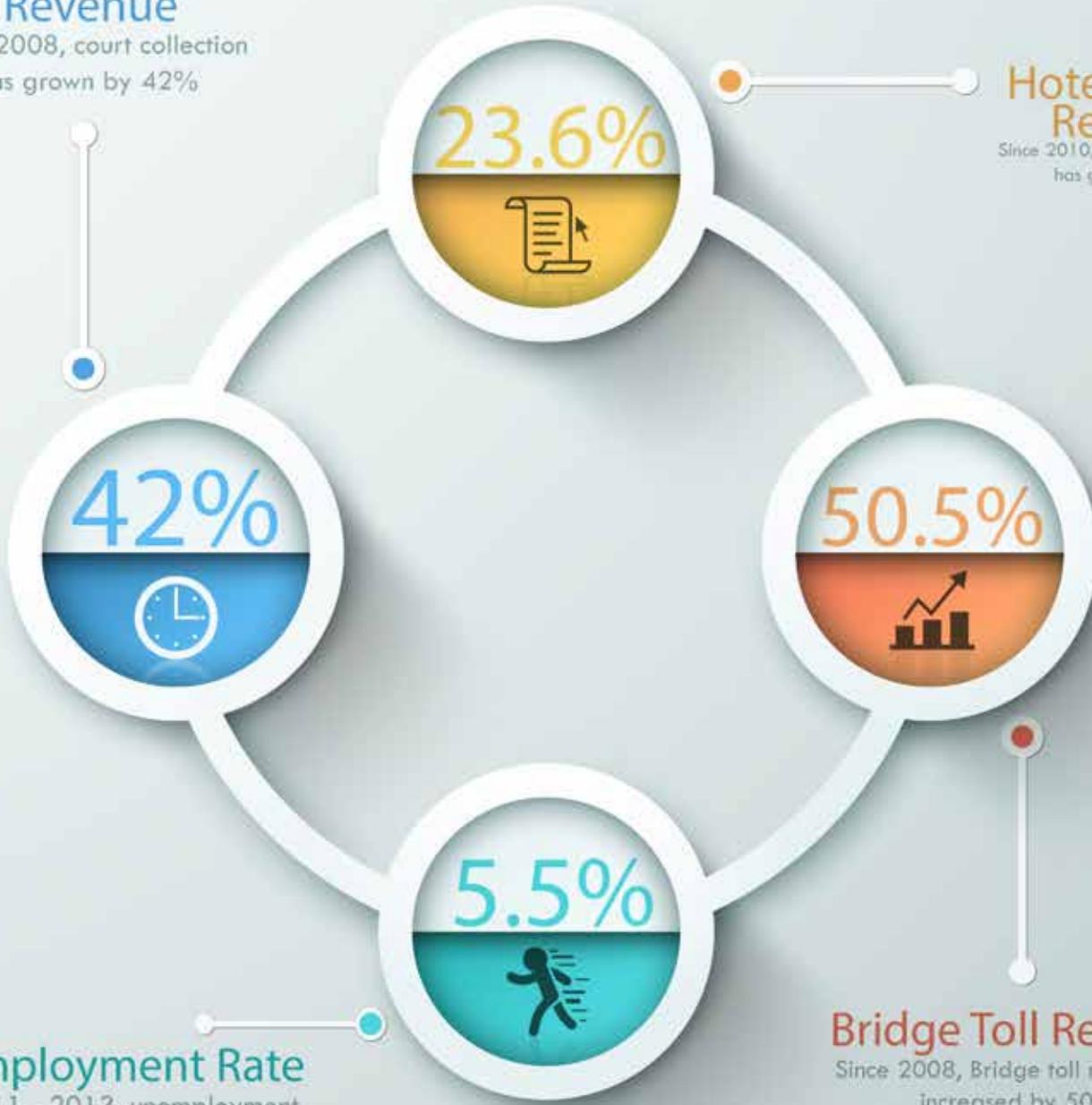


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5.5%



# One Man's Junk is Another's Treasure

By Lori Vermaas

When Rick Cardenas was a kid, trash men doing their jobs captivated him. "Remember how they used to ride in the back? I always wanted to do that. It just seemed cool." Since 2013, Cardenas, owner of RGV Junk Removal, has been doing more than riding in the back. He helms a two-man crew that cleans out and properly disposes of residential or commercial junk, like sofas, clothing, paper garbage -- you name it, Cardenas can likely take care of it. Except for hazardous materials. "That requires special permits," he said.

Cardenas was inspired to start a junk removal business after struggling to clean out his living space during a move. "I couldn't find any place to dump my stuff. As I looked more into it, I realized that up north these kinds of services are very popular." Indeed, some national companies, like 1-800-GOT-JUNK (which doesn't offer services in the Valley), have annual sales exceeding \$2 million.

Cardenas isn't raking in that much, but he's doing well. With a fleet of two logoed trucks (one with a 60-foot bed, the other a box truck that holds about 10-12 cubic yards of

materials), he averages about five to eight removals a week across the Valley. He and his employees wear a uniform of logoed caps and shirts. "We're a professional company."

The biggest challenge when he started was setting his rates. He settled on charging by the load because the majority of the dumps charge by cubic yardage. But equally challenging has been evaluating the degree of labor a particular job requires. Consider his first removal, "a big ol' pile of concrete," multiple pillars left by subcontractors after they had remodeled a Pharr home. "The work was hard. We had to wheelbarrow it, because we couldn't park right next to it."

Most of Cardenas's jobs involve relocating a variety of materials, like household trash and castoffs, particularly when people relocate. He customizes each removal by carefully sifting through all the refuse with a client. "I'll have my guys there for four hours, disposing of the junk and organizing what's left in an orderly fashion (like putting tools in a certain area in a garage). We'll do it all for you -- mop, sweep, clean your ceiling fan, windows. For some people we've cut their lawns, though we're not landscapers."

Although that phase of the job

*Rick Cardenas receives calls to clean out household junk, which his crew unloads at local dumps, paying by the cubic yard. Clients cleaning out garages and attics call RGV Junk Removal to haul away treasures that became trash. (VBR)*



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ALLURE MEN



*Scrap lumber cleaned out of a garage waits to be hauled away by RGV Junk Removal. (VBR)*

is detail-oriented enough, properly disposing of the refuse is just as demanding. First, landfills are scarce. “There’s only two cities with landfills operating in the Valley, Edinburg and Brownsville. Harlingen only has a transfer station.” Then there’s the expense. “The average charge for us at a landfill is well over \$300,” which then affects the rates he needs to charge. Plus, he prefers to keep as much junk as possible out of the landfills, whose space is at a premium in the Valley. As a result, “we try to do a lot of recycling. We like to donate a lot of stuff, particularly clothes and furniture to churches, Goodwill.”

Doing this kind of work has given him a lot of perspective on the Valley’s waste problem. “The Valley has a big issue with illegal dumping,” said Cardenas. Scan any farm road or drainage ditch in the Valley, and you’ll likely see sofas or mattresses on the side of the road or tires along a ditch’s edge. The problem is so significant that some businesses, particularly cell-tower companies, regularly hire him for jobs. “We maintain some of these properties. People do a lot of illegal dumping on those sites.”

Mattresses are a particular concern for Cardenas. “They are one of the biggest calls that we get. I’d rather not throw a mattress into a landfill, but we have to because there aren’t any places to recycle them, especially if they’re old. They might have bedbugs, which are a big problem in the Valley right now.” However, Cardenas sees an opportunity for expanding his business and helping out the community even more. “There is a mattress company opening in San Antonio called Mattress Be Gone. They recycle mattresses. Some day, I’d like to build a warehouse to stack up stuff like mattresses. Then one of their 18-wheelers could take them away.”

Although dealing with junk and the finite amount of space that’s been developed to deal with it in the Valley can be depressing, Cardenas has been quite happy with the services he’s providing. “At the end of the day, it’s a really good business. No matter what, you have to have a passion for it. I do, and my guys are very helpful. That’s why I take care of them. They’ve been with me from the beginning.”

*Holding about 10 cubic yards of junk, this truck has made many trips to landfills to unload customers’ trash. (VBR)*



# The Chamber

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*For more information, see [rgvjunkremoval.com](http://rgvjunkremoval.com).*

# SBA Director Increases Outreach Programs

By Lori Vermaas

Angela Burton officially began her term as district director of the lower Rio Grande Valley district office of the U.S. Small Business Administration on April 5.

The promotion from deputy director appears to be a perfect fit for Burton, whose experience as president and CEO of the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce from 2004-2013 further deepened the ties she developed with the Valley business community since moving here 30 years ago. Back then, she was a 20-something in the military, a self-described jack-of-all-trades who had worked in a variety of military sectors before entering the civilian world. “I had a series of entry-level jobs, from working security at detention camps and medical facilities to doing graphic design at the Bargain Book, as I worked my way through school. As

a result, I met a lot of people along the way.”

One of them was Nick Soto, who hired her as an intern for the Small Business Development Center. The organization had an office in the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, which gave Burton direct experience working with aspiring business owners. “I got the chance to see clients who wanted to open a business.” She witnessed how business counseling improved their prospects. She also learned the importance of scripting business plans. “There’s more to opening a business than just getting an idea for one. It’s about research, and implementing it successfully.”

By the time Burton was named chamber president, she was eager to apply the techniques she had picked up along the way as well as to incorporate the more creative, field-oriented methods she prefers.

Angela Burton, who has been with the SBA since 2013, said her time with the government agency has been “an interesting learning experience,” given all its specialized rules and regulations. (VBR)

**“I just want to sit at as many tables as I can and provide as much outreach as possible, to engage the community.”**

**--Angela Burton**





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As part of National Small Business Week, the U.S. Small Business Administration takes the opportunity to highlight the impact of outstanding entrepreneurs, small business owners, and others from all 50 states and U.S. territories. Every day, they're working to grow small businesses, create 21st century jobs, drive innovation, and increase America's global competitiveness.

An advocate of a hands-on approach, Burton has developed programs for specific target groups, including the Women Entrepreneurs Small Business Boot Camp, which she started in 2009.

An annual program that involves the SBA and the Women's Business Center, the camp allowed her to create a model that could expand to other communities. "That is in the process right now, to figure out which community is next. We'll continue with Brownsville, but roll it out to others. This last class had 18 ladies in it. One of them received a small SBA loan. It was for a women's senior beauty pageant in Harlingen." Ever curious about the workings of any business, Burton volunteered to help out at the pageant by supervising the entrants while they were backstage to make sure they were in place and on time. "It was like herding cats back there," said Burton. "Some were 65 and older. They all had numbers and so there we were, calling them out for roll call, and then looking for number five, and later finding out she'd been in the bathroom. So it took a great deal of patience."

As SBA district director, Burton intends to continue her activist approach. "I just want to sit at as many tables as I can and provide as much outreach as possible, to engage the community, to find those areas that need support, in order to build capacity and economic development." Along with helping to promote businesses started by people over the age of 50, other goals include promoting innovation. "That is an area that I would like to move into, in helping to take an idea from sort of a napkin concept to the actual commercialization of it. There's a group of people, including those at the university, that are working at putting together an innovation center. So those are areas I'd like to expand on a little bit."

With only seven staff persons to cover 14 counties, Burton well understands the logistical challenges. But she also knows that the Valley is quite lucky. "There are 68 SBA field offices in the United States, so some states only have one office. So we are very fortunate to have a district office in our own area [Texas has six total]. People need to take advantage of the fact that investment by the SBA down here, that it's here in our own backyard.

"I feel very honored and appreciative that the agency had the confidence in me to promote me," said Burton. "I'm going to do a really good job. I will maintain the same open-door policy here that I had at the chamber."

*For more information, see [sba.gov/offices/district/tx/Harlingen](http://sba.gov/offices/district/tx/Harlingen) or call 542-4341 about the boot camp.*

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# Can I Trademark That?

By Francisco Orozco

As a business owner, you work hard to distinguish yourself from the competition. Development of symbols, slogans or designs to make your business memorable is a necessary component of your business plan. At some point, the inevitable “I should trademark that!” moment hits. Here is a brief overview of the common, yet often misunderstood, topic of trademark law.

A trademark, or service mark, is a distinct set of words, phrases and design commonly found on signs, packaging or advertisements for particular products or services. These marks help identify a good or service as being from a particular manufacturer or vendor.

Under U.S. and Texas law, trademarks are protected by common law, federal statute and state statute. Legal rights in certain trademarks are garnered under common law, registration with the United States Patent and Trademark Office and registration with the



Texas Secretary of State. Registration is not required to gain a right in a certain mark. Under common law, the right to use a particular trademark arises from actual use of the mark before anyone else establishes rights to it. This allows an unregistered prior user of a mark to claim trademark rights superior to a later user of the same mark who has registered it.

A prior user of a mark can challenge a potential or actual trademark registration. When an application for registration is challenged by an unregistered user, the tribunal decides whether to register the mark or whether a registered mark infringes on the prior unregistered user's rights. It evaluates factors including the market penetration of the unregistered mark, the sales volume of the trademarked product, growth trends in the area, the ratio of actual purchasers versus potential customers, and the amount of product advertising in the area. If the unregistered mark has sufficiently penetrated a subject market, the application for registration will be denied, or a registered user may have to pay damages for infringement on the prior unregistered user's rights. Before undertaking a risky and expensive challenge to registration or seeking damages against a registered user, the unregistered user should consider that it takes a fair degree of due diligence to do so.

While certain rights may be garnered through use of a mark, there are benefits to registration. For example, a mark registered in Texas gives the registered owner rights, priorities and remedies that an unregistered owner of the mark may otherwise not have against persons who infringe on the mark. A registered mark gives “constructive notice” to others that the registered owner claims prior rights in the mark. In addition, the process of registering a mark may prevent you from unintentionally infringing upon a prior registered user's rights in the mark you want. Accordingly, it is wise to register trademarks, even if you have well-established com-

mon law rights.

Registering a trademark requires filing an application with supporting documentation. Although registrations with the Texas Secretary of State are processed quickly, it can take upwards of 12 months for registration with the U.S. PTO. Trademarks registered with the U.S. PTO are good for ten years, provided that update requirements are met.

It is important to understand the “strength” of your specific trademark. Marks are either Famous, Coined, Arbitrary, Suggestive, Descriptive or Generic.

“Famous” marks, like Coca Cola, are afforded broad protections. An effort to trademark similar items that could possibly dilute the strength of the Famous mark can be challenged, even if the marks do not compete in the same product sphere.

Coined marks, such as Polaroid, are the next strongest in terms of trademark protection. Arbitrary marks are terms with a defined meaning, but used out of context. For example, Apple has used its trademark to reference computer products, as opposed to a fruit. Suggestive marks like “Blu-ray” are suggestive of the particular product. Finally, Descriptive and Generic marks may not qualify for trademark protection. For example, the word “pizza” is a generic term and would not qualify for trademark registration, unless combined with unique, distinctive terms and designs.

Trademark owners should work diligently to protect their marks. Failure to enforce trademark rights could result in the loss of an owner's right to exclusive use. Policing use of the mark involves inspecting media sources, sending prompt cease-and-desist notices, hiring “watch services” to notify the mark holder of potential registrations and filing opposition if a comparable registration is filed. Furthermore, using © with registered marks and ™ with common law marks will put potential infringers on notice that you claim rights in a certain mark. Failure to give such notice could limit your recovery against anyone who infringes on your rights in the mark.

*Francisco Orozco is an attorney with the Kantack Alcantara Law Office, P.C., whose practice includes estate planning and probate, real estate and business law. For more information, see [kantack-lawoffice.com](http://kantack-lawoffice.com).*

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# App Developer Connects

By Lori Vermaas

“Never did I think I was going to be a business owner,” said Dalinda Gonzalez-Alcantar, CEO of eJucomm (the first two letters pronounced “edge”) School Mobile Applications, an educational apps publisher. “I never aspired to be a business owner, but I’ve always aspired to connect families with their schools.” A teacher in the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program at Robert Vela High School in Edinburg, Gonzalez-Alcantar was coordinating the career readiness program in the McAllen School District in 2010 when she noticed that the bulk of her students didn’t have home Web access to the work they were doing in class. But most of their families did have a smartphone, particularly an Android. She saw an opportunity.

Knowing that many of her students’ parents were not highly computer-literate, Gonzalez-Alcantar decided to create an app that would require only one click to enable users to connect with their children’s teacher and their school’s schedules -- something that anyone, no matter their primary language, could make sense of how to use. After taking eight months in 2010 to teach herself how to code,

she not only had a working app, within two years she would head her own company.

The path Gonzalez-Alcantar took had its fair share of challenges. “Looking back, I wonder what was I thinking, because my daughter was three months old, and I was coaching and teaching art, and I also have a son.” The self-education required a considerable amount of research as well as copious attempts at creating demos in the wee hours of the morning. She knew she started to get the hang of it when at 2:30 a.m., “I finally clicked something, and it didn’t say ‘error’ and it actually ran. I suffered from insomnia, but I was just driven to figure this out. It wasn’t all that healthy, but it was the only time I could find.”

Her app, called Family Kinex (pronounced almost like “connects”), initially was so popular that she began customizing them for free for other schools in the McAllen district. The freebies became a thing of the past, however, when the McAllen Chamber of Commerce awarded her a \$10,000 innovation grant in 2012 to start-up eJucomm. “People don’t realize there’s a ton of resources in the Valley when it comes to starting a business. There’s a lot of free resources, especially those offered by the SBDC and SBA. These programs and organizations are specifically put in our region to help build companies and businesses, especially in technology.”

Gonzalez-Alcantar’s company is “definitely small.” She has three employees, one a California-based designer who handles the basics of the upgrades and customization, which can get challenging since Android has about 3,500 devices on the market. The 32 different versions of her app are in use in five different states: Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Texas and California. Garnering revenues of \$26,000 last year, the company’s total profits are about \$90,000.

The mobile app industry is a booming one, with revenues projected to reach \$77 billion by 2017. But Gonzalez-Alcantar’s goals are more modest. She hopes to expand her company, but at a slower pace. Nevertheless, in late March she qualified for a national competition, the SBA InnovateHer challenge. The program aims to identify the most innovative products and services that will empower women’s lives and that of their families. She qualified after winning a local pitch competition judged by various Valley business leaders, including the McAllen Chamber and several UTPA

*Dalinda Gonzalez-Alcantar said her app is “super user-friendly.” It relies on icons, so there’s no language barrier when it comes to choosing the right buttons. (VBR)*



professors. As one of four local contestants, she recalled, “we had five minutes in front of the panel of judges and five minutes to field questions.” The national round, to be held during the first week of May, promises to be more intense, with no more than 10 finalists. If she wins, she wants to use the prize money, up to \$30,000, to update her company’s technology and to hire more office help. That way she won’t have to field emails before going to school each morning or after putting her children to bed.

Gonzalez-Alcantar fully understands the challenges of owning a small business in the Valley, especially since hers is in a non-traditional industry for women. “I’m a female, 34, Latina. I’m not the small person living in a small apartment eating Ramen making cool computer stuff. I can’t be that.” But breaking that barrier, breaking expectations, is “really empowering.” Her workload, which takes up about 40% of her time as an educator, is “difficult and sometimes feels impossible for sure. The work never ends. Sometimes I want to give up, but in the end it’s worth it.”

*For more information see [ejucomm.com](http://ejucomm.com).*



# Spying on the Competition

By Alberto V. Espinoza

Competitive research, or “spying” on the competition, is nothing new. Almost every business owner is curious about what their competitors are doing to draw more customers and increase sales. They might even do some “secret shopping” to get a better feel of the opposition. Many, however, do not take full-advantage of the wealth of information that could be acquired by researching their competitors.

Beyond satisfying their curiosity, small business owners can learn what business strategies their competitors are using and may even apply some of these tactics in their own businesses or to avoid making similar mistakes. Several techniques, methods, and tools exist that small businesses can use to effectively gather information and ultimately help to better position or differentiate their businesses in the marketplace.

## Traditional Competitive Research

One of the tried-and-tested techniques of competitive research is reconnaissance. For any and all businesses, nothing beats the information gathered from primary research or face-to-face contact with competitors.

Secret shopping is one of the best ways to conduct competitor reconnaissance. Business owners can purchase a product or service from competitors and make observations. What is the quality of customer service? What is the quality of the product or service? What is a rough estimate of how many individuals work in the business? How is the business environment? Is the establishment clean and comfortable? What are some of the characteristics of their customers?

For established businesses, gauging existing customers is also a valuable method for obtaining information. Existing patrons may even be the customers of the competition. Striking up casual conversations and allowing customers to provide feedback can provide insight on what they like or dislike about the competition.

Traditional competitive research can be long, especially if there are numerous competitors. To minimize the time-consuming process, this method can be conducted every six to 12 months.

## Online Competitive Research

A great amount of competitor information is available online. Use the following techniques and tools to analyze a competitor's online presence.

Visit the competitor's website. A ba-

sic search will reveal whether or not the competition has a website. If so, is the competition's website user-friendly? Are you able to find relevant information such as hours of operation, locations and contact information easily? Are product and service descriptions readily available?

The same questions can be used with social media. Social media sites provide updated information on what the competition is doing almost on a daily basis. Businesses typically advertise a new product, service or location on their social media sites. Customer feedback, typically including very specific comments, is usually available on their sites as well. Another free tool to gather intelligence is Google Alerts. After creating an account, this tool allows companies to receive alerts whenever competitors are mentioned online. Businesses can also sign up to receive updates directly from competitors if they offer such a service.

Finally, businesses can learn what changes their competitors have made to their websites by using tools such as Wayback Machine. These websites serve as an Internet archive where businesses can search a competitor's web address and determine when and how they updated their website. Regularly checking for this information allows businesses to see new product lines or incentives by the competition.

For more detailed information, conduct a keyword search to see what the competition uses to drive traffic and sales to their websites. Many websites include keywords in their metadata. Metadata is basic information about data itself, which can make finding particular instances of data easier. In the Internet Explorer browser, go to the competitor's website, find the tool bar, click on “Tools,” and scroll down and click on “F12 developer tools.” This brings up the source code for the competitor's website. On the right hand side, a search box will appear or select “Ctrl + F” to bring it into view. On the search box, type “keywords.” If the site has metadata keywords, they will have the tag meta-name “=keywords.” This shows what the competitor uses to drive traffic to their site.

By applying these techniques, methods and tools, businesses can put together a profile for each competitor and identify their business strategies and best practices. Spying on the competition does not have to be expensive or time-consuming, especially if done online. Ultimately, the purpose of competitive research is for the business to offer a better product or service to customers, differentiate the business, and give it a competitive edge.

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# March 2015 Labor Market Report

Courtesy of Workforce Solutions and Mike Willis

TWC has released the March 2015 Labor Market and Employment reports. Unemployment rates dropped slightly across most of the region. Hidalgo and Cameron counties dropped by .1%, and Starr and Webb counties were unchanged. Willacy county increased by 1.1% to a 12.2% level, probably the impact of the MTC layoffs at the detention facility in Raymondville.

McAllen had the lowest reported city rate, at 4.6%, followed closely by Edinburg with 4.8%. Harlingen and San Benito were third and fourth at 5.6%, followed by Mission at 5.7%.

The RGV/Laredo employment reports once again show an increase of 1000 jobs in the Leisure & Hospitality sector, and another 600 in the Government sector, which includes Law Enforcement, Public Education, and other public service occupations.

The Energy/Construction sector once again showed no net job losses in our region, and the Corpus Christi report even showed a net gain of 400 jobs in Energy/Construction.

At the state level, TWC showed a net loss of 2800 Oil & Gas jobs in March, bringing

## McAllen - Edinburg - Mission MSA (Hidalgo) March 2015



## Brownsville - Harlingen MSA (Cameron) March 2015



the year-to-date total losses to 9700 statewide. There are a total of 308,600 people employed in the "Mining & Logging" sector in Texas, which captures the direct energy sector jobs.

There were also net job losses of 2300 in the manufacturing sector and 5800 in Construction in March. I suspect most of these were energy-related, as some of the well-known "energy company" names are actually classified as manufacturing since they make equipment for the oil & gas industry. Some examples of this are Weatherford and Baker Hughes. There are also numerous companies providing support services to the energy sector that are classified as Construction companies. As I mentioned last month, our goods-producing sectors can both create and destroy a lot of other jobs because of their high economic multiplier!

Our TWC reports have so far shown few job losses in 2015 in the energy/construction sector for our region. We continue to see large scale layoff announcements (at the national level) from companies in this sector, like Halliburton and Schlumberger. I again reviewed January-March unemployment claims data for our board area, and found close to 1000 reported claims from RGV residents working for companies in the energy sector. There were even more reported claims from individuals working for energy-related companies in the construction sector. At some point, I expect to see the regional trend picked up in the TWC samples and reports.

Several business managers in the RGV have told me they are seeing quite a few people coming around looking for jobs, who said they were laid off in the Eagle Ford Shale. All of the evidence I see points to significant layoffs taking place in the Eagle Ford Shale area.

# Swimming in Shark-Infested Waters

By Tim Berry

Are you an entrepreneur looking to get your startup funded? Be careful.

It's no surprise that hopeful entrepreneurs are good targets. Too often we're led to believe that getting investment money is the ultimate victory. Supposedly we're all going to be successful as soon as some investor says "yes" and we get a big check. And that eagerness to get the money makes us vulnerable to sharks.

While you're probably as alert as anybody to scams involving fake Nigerian royalty or free weekends in resorts, your normal anti-scam radar can malfunction when you're in startup mode looking to get financed. Keep your eyes open and stay safe.

Take, for example, the business plan writers who sell their services using the claim that the look and feel of a written plan will get you investment. That's just not the case. Investors invest in the people, the business and future potential growth. But over-promising on results isn't necessarily a scam if the business plan writers actually deliver a written plan. On the other hand, people selling pre-written business plans with claims like "investor-ready business plans" for sale and "just fill in the blanks" know they are lying.

A lot of general and obvious rules apply. Deals that seem too good to be true are almost always just that -- not true. Real investors write checks -- not invoices.

Yes, it takes money to make money. But that's about ideas, execution and working capital -- not sharks. Beware of consultants, brokers, loans and offshore deals that collect your money as a step towards getting investment. For more detail and a good list, check out Martin Zwilling's "Shortcuts to Entrepreneur Funding are Usually Scams" on Forbes.com. Adam Roy of Gaebler Ventures has good related advice in a post called "Recognizing and Avoiding Business Scams." Here are some specifics:

- Fake investment brokers who contact you saying they represent investors, but require a retainer up front. You pay the money, and whoops, sorry, the investors disappear.
- Fake investors, often from overseas, interested in investing but only after you pay some fees to cover costs including due

diligence.

- Offers of commercial loans, promising quick approval, but requiring stiff fees for fast processing. Then the lender vanishes.
- And of course don't fall for pyramid schemes, chain letter and other classic get-rich-quick schemes.
- Beware of businesses that don't like written contracts and documents.
- Always check references and don't settle for references they give you; do a Web search and find your own.

## Angel investment pay-to-play

Many legitimate angel investment groups charge a fee for processing and submission to a screening process. For example, the group I'm a member of is right now taking submissions for a May investment of six figures in local startup. We charge \$125 to the startups that enter. The fee goes not to us, the angel investors, but to the local chamber of commerce that orga-

nizes the event. And startups that submit get at the very least a real review and great feedback from real angel investors, worth a lot more than the submission fee.

On the other hand, you can find startup events that charge thousands of dollars to startups for a chance to pitch to a group of angel investors. And you can find some very vocal critics of these events, who call them a scam. How much is okay to pay? I think paying a hundred dollars or so to a local chamber of commerce is fair, and paying thousands to pitch is probably a bad deal.

Yes, you have to "spend money to make money." But no legitimate venture capitalist invests in new businesses through oddball approaches such as phantom funding, "qualifying" you with cash or inviting you to join a long chain letter. What your gut tells you is still valid: even in the exhilarating world of entrepreneurship, if something sounds too good to be true ... it probably is.

*Tim Berry is a guest blogger with SBA's website. Joining the sba.gov community allows you to discuss, share and get insights from fellow business owners as well as industry and government experts.*



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# In the Spotlight



*Fred Rusteberg, president/CEO of IBC Brownsville, was presented the first STARGATE Innovation Leader Award for his contributions which paved the way for SpaceX and its growing collaboration with UTB's advanced space research projects. (Courtesy Paul Chouy, University of Texas-Brownsville)*



*Larry Levine, President and CEO of LEVCOR, Inc. addresses the crowd as he announces immediate and future plans of Pharr Town Center. (VBR)*

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*Port Isabel Chamber of Commerce held its Annual Awards Banquet April 17 at Pirate's Landing Cannon Bar on the docks of Pirate's Landing. Honorees and guests enjoyed a beautiful evening of celebrating service to the community. (VBR)*



*Jimmy Silva, HEB Port Isabel store manager and Chamber board chairman, and Betty Wells, president of the Port Isabel Chamber of Commerce. (VBR)*

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