



Making history

RANDY SIKER | NMBW

Avista Video Histories Creative Director Steve Delasantos, left, and President Lisa Witt, right, work with both businesses and families.

Avista Video Histories documents family, business info

BY AMANDA C. KOOSER | SPECIAL TO NMBW

Lisa Witt, founder and president of Avista Video Histories in Albuquerque, is one of those lucky entrepreneurs who turned a hobby and a passion into a viable business.

When she moved to Albuquerque from Washington, D.C., in 1995, she knew she would have to detour away from her international relations background. She chose to follow her interest in creating family video histories.

"If people pass away, their stories are lost. We were thinking we should interview our family, our parents, grandparents, great-aunts and uncles about World War II, the Depression and giving advice to grandchildren," Witt says. "I decided to take a family hobby and see if I could turn it into a business."

Avista launched in 1996 as a self-financed startup. Witt used her parents and in-laws as guinea pigs for her first videos. She estimates that startup costs ran between \$50,000 and \$70,000, with video equipment and software representing a substantial part of that investment.

"I didn't take out bank loans. Some of it was Visa and MasterCard. I was fortunate to have some resources to put into it," she says.

Today, Avista offers a wide range of ser-

vices, including family history, wedding, marketing, documentary and training videos. Family videos make up the greatest percentage of projects, but business and marketing videos account for about two-thirds of the company's revenue.

"It supports a lot of my passion on the family side," Witt says.

Witt first expanded beyond her family focus when senior groups started to request videos for their organizations.

"I realized that I didn't necessarily need to put myself in one niche," she says.

In 2000, she jumped into business videos with marketing and training products. Avista recently added legal videos to the lineup. Witt had her two employees certified by the American Guild of Court Videographers after extensive training.

"The biggest portion of our legal business is depositions. It's a specialized field, and everything has to be very precise to hold up in court," Witt says.

Witt learned a valuable lesson about how to expand a business early on. Around the time Avista launched in Albuquerque, she also opened a small branch of the firm in a retirement community near Los Angeles.

"It was a great concept in theory, but I was still new to business. I didn't have all our processes down. That was probably my biggest mistake, because it ate up a lot of funds," she says.

The California branch was only open for about six months. She closed it to focus on building the Albuquerque business.

"Here I had more networking, more people and could control things more," she says.

The recession has put some pressure on Avista. The company's best year came in 2008, with revenue around \$300,000. Last year saw a drop to around \$250,000, but Witt expects to hold steady for 2010. Her customers often come in with less funding than they once had, so she works with them to accommodate their needs on tighter budgets.

"Sometimes it's about doing a little bit more for less, especially for clients that have been with us a long time," she says.

Witt sometimes works with clients to lower costs by doing more preparation for the project in-house. She also has offered discounts on services such as VHS to DVD transfer. The extra traffic can turn into more business.

"Once people come into Avista, they often think of other family or business projects they have in mind," she says.

The downturn has spurred Witt to expand her government contracting work. One major project came in 2008, when Avista created a statewide jury orientation video.

Avista was chosen through a standard

Vital Stats:

Company: Avista Video Histories
President: Lisa Witt
Address: 5353 Wyoming NE, Ste. C
Albuquerque 87109
Phone: (505) 828-2100
Website: avistavideo.com
Employees: two
Revenue: \$250,000 for 2009

Strategies:

1. Perfect your business processes before trying to expand.
2. Find new niches that complement your strengths.
3. Offer help at a discounted rate to community organizations for their fundraisers.

proposal and bidding process. The video required shooting footage across the state, filming in courtrooms and even reenacting the historic process of throwing accused people into water.

"When you're talking about historical things, it can be a little dry, but the video was vibrant," says Janet Blair, public information officer for the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court, who serves on the state Supreme Court's Committee for Improvement of Jury Service.

Avista competes with specialized video production businesses, and sets itself apart by offering a breadth of services

and production types. Witt has seen an increase in the number of video service providers that operate out of people's houses.

"There are fewer businesses that have a storefront. We are one of the few remaining that have regular hours so that people can walk in," Witt says.

Getting the word out about Avista requires constant effort.

"We have been here for 15 years. That helps in terms of getting a lot of referrals," Witt says.

When she was starting out, Witt often gave educational seminars on family video histories to senior groups and attended trade shows. The company also created a 13-part series for Albuquerque's PAX-TV affiliate in 1999, delving into the stories of New Mexicans with active community lives.

Witt's favorite networking tool these days is partnering with organizations to produce tribute videos for large fundraising events such as the Albuquerque Sports Hall of Fame, the Silver Horizons Senior Hall of Fame and the University of New Mexico Distinguished Alumni Awards. She often works with the organizations to create the videos at a discounted rate. It's a way to get Avista's work in front of influential people and contribute to community organizations at the same time.

"You can never sit quietly and just hope business comes in," Witt says.

Still, ultimately, Witt's most powerful sales tools are the videos themselves.