



OFFICE SPACE INC

The Little Engine That Could



Michelle Lechuga

Michelle Lechuga grew up in a close knit Mexican-American family with a strong work ethic. She did not learn English until she was 5 years old. It is apparent that she took to heart the message in the classic children's book, *The Little Engine That Could*. She grew up "thinking she could" as is the mantra throughout the book.

Michelle sat down with CMBR, after a visit to the Navistar headquarters brought her eye-catching, stylist, functional furnishings to light. In her own words...

Why did you choose the office furniture business?

I have been in the contract office furniture industry for over 18 years on the operations side of the business. My business partner is also from the industry where he has spent nearly 20 years in sales. Between the two of us we felt we had the complimentary skill sets required to have a chance at becoming successful and decided to take a chance out on our own. The



ChicagoMSDC organization has been very helpful in aiding our success.

How did office space, a small MBE, land the Navistar contract?

Like many contract office furniture dealers in the Chicago market, Office Space had done some business with Navistar prior to their Lisle world headquarters relocation. As a result we were able to demonstrate our service capabilities and unwavering commitment to our clients' satisfaction.

Much of our initial work involved doing the little things that don't generate profits. However, those opportunities did give us the chance to demonstrate our commitment when others before us had not.

In other locations Navistar needed to match very old, discontinued furniture. In some instances hundreds of new workstations were needed to integrate with hundreds of existing stations already in place. We introduced ways to blend new, used and refurbished product to match the existing and keep costs in line.

When we became aware of Navistar's WHQ (world headquarters) relocation we knew we had a very loyal customer who was open minded and willing to listen. We had earned the reputation as a proven service provider and furniture experts. The problem was we didn't represent any of the major furniture manufacturers capable of producing furniture for over 4000 employees in the aggressive time frame required.

What appeared to be a limitation quickly became a strength. Since

we didn't represent any of the capable manufacturers we didn't have a predetermined agenda. Therefore in theory we could represent them all. Navistar loved the idea and to their credit were already considering a similar approach.

Not ironically, they were concerned about the size of our organization and needed competing viewpoints so they brought in other local dealers to discuss their ideas. Ultimately Office Space was very fortunate to have been awarded the project. We were not about to disappoint Navistar for their bold and unconventional approach.

Office Space and the selected manufactures never missed a deadline or expectation. By last count there were over 750 semi-trucks of furniture delivered and installed. Many consider the Navistar furniture purchase to have been one the largest in the history of Chicago and neighboring states.

Has the council, ChicagoMSDC, supported your efforts?

ChicagoMSDC has been a great support. The MBE certification requirements are extensive and detailed. Throughout the submittal process the Council stayed patient while providing Office Space the professional guidance necessary.

Navistar recognizes the importance of implementing business practices that reflect the market they serve and as a result promote the growth and development of the entire community. Diversity spend initiatives build a stronger community. By implementing programs that support minority businesses the ChicagoMSDC is giving back to those who may otherwise go unnoticed.

Anything else you would like to share?

It should be understood that the success of the Navistar WHQ relocation would have never been possible without many other vital product and service providers including but not limited to; Duke Construction Co, Jones Lang LaSalle, Partners by Design and Modular Installations.

Most importantly and a very special thanks to the critical and forward thinking members of the Navistar team including Don Sharp, Bill Jerpe, Allen Gray, Mike Jastreboski and Jeff Bowen who chose a less conventional approach to buying furniture. In the end their bold approach proved to be a big winner!

The next move for Office Space Inc? Are implementing growth strategies that will roll-out in early 2013 with a new website, design and marketing plan. Michelle notes that she met her new designer at CBOF 45, another MBE to MBE collaboration in action.

One thing is for sure, Michelle's "little engine" continues to be consistent in its climb up to the summit. ●