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Sunday, August 22, 2004

Lessons Learned

Southfield woman uses connections to start over

She turns to client database from past job to begin new business

By Maureen McDonald / Special to The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD — The recent bankruptcy of Vanguard Media Inc. didn't bankrupt the career of Cheryl D. Ajamu. She took her database of clients, celebrities and volunteers with her to her new Southfield business, The Ajamu Group LLC, so it could establish a large presence in advertising and special events.

Recently, Ajamu brought international fitness guru Donna Richardson to the Franklin Athletic Club in Southfield for a fund-raiser serving Orchards Children's Services in Southfield. Previous contacts with Pfizer, Eden Foods and Comerica helped Ajamu subsidize the event and provide product samples for attendees.

"Cheryl and her volunteers were extremely well-organized," said Itzie Saar, fitness director of Franklin Athletic Club, which rented its large aerobic room for Richardson to perform.

Ajamu's 12-member team arrived two hours in advance to practice its delivery and stayed an hour later to assure all 50 attendees filled out a customer satisfaction survey. Securing a top-name talent for a first-time fund-raising event occurred because Ajamu and Richardson worked together on a promotion for Heart & Soul magazine, one of the publications in the portfolio of Vanguard



Seth Lower / The Detroit News

Cheryl D. Ajamu brought international fitness guru Donna Richardson to the Franklin Athletic Club in Southfield for a fund-raiser serving Orchards Children's Services.

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Media Inc. Ajamu maintained an e-mail connection with the celebrity and often worked out with her fitness videos.

"National celebrities help draw local participation," said Ajamu, who says she files every networking contact, every new connection in her database so it's accessible by computer and PalmPilot. "Donna was a cover subject for our magazine, and we struck up a friendship."

Ajama said she was crushed when Vanguard Media folded its Detroit office in November 2003. She had helped increase automotive advertising by 50 percent, but she had to start from scratch. She recruited Geri Dolan to create a Web site (www.ajamugroup.com) that professionally presented her company.

She called upon volunteers who had helped with special events on varied projects for Vanguard, asking them to help with the fitness seminar.

"I didn't ask them to help me; I asked to help improve literacy through Orchards Children's Services," she said.

Ajama worked with primary sponsors, Pfizer and Eden, to help cover room rental, advertising and gift bags, then solicited smaller companies to provide door prizes. She even secured a door prize from her favorite Starbucks at 12 Mile and Telegraph roads.

Staging a successful event helped Ajama collect more business cards for her database and established her as someone who could hold fundraisers for other charities. She said some other magazines have contacted her about advertising projects.

What is the key to keep business momentum?

"Organization," says Ajama. "You run every activity like a business. If people donate time, you provide dinner or baseball tickets to say thanks. If you solicit donations, you look for ways to make it fit their needs and yours. You deliver on your promises."

Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit free-lance writer.

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