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Industry publication keeps Tucson optics in the world's eye

By Kyle Schliesman

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Inside Tucson Business

Attending a conference in New York City, Breault Research Organization Chief Executive Officer Kathleen Perkins mingled with journalists from the Wall Street Journal and other well-known national publications.

While it may seem odd for the top official of a Tucson-based, multi-million dollar optics software engineering firm to be rubbing elbows with media moguls, Perkins actually is responsible for an increasingly influential publication of her own: Optics Report. The publication, now available online at www.opticsreport.com, provides interviews, articles and other information pertaining to the optics industry.

First published as a monthly newsletter in March 2001, the report was designed to provide investors and venture capitalists with market research and information about scientific studies in the field of optics.

"The idea had been germinating for a long time," Perkins said. "Up until recently, there hadn't been research outlets following optics."

When Perkins performed her own research of the optics industry, she found that the breadth of market data was far less than for other scientific fields. Part of that is a lack of professional numbers. There are far fewer optical engineers in the world than engineers in other disciplines, Perkins said. Another problem is that people do not often see the end product of optics research outside of the lighting industry.

Simply, optics is not a science with a lot of public exposure. With so little public data about the underlying technology of optics and the markets that technology reaches, private investors were going virtually uniformed about the industry.

"Our intentions are to be that source for optics information," Perkins said.

Initially, the report was sent only to venture capitalists. To a degree, investors are still the main target of the publication, even though it now has much broader distribution. Perkins intended to use the publication to present investors with the research being performed by University of Arizona professors and optics startups in order to bring the two groups together.

"The route to a venture capitalist can be challenging," Perkins said.

Between the first edition of the report and today, the venture scene has changed a lot, Perkins said. Investors became more skeptical of research reports following a slew of corporate scandals and a struggling economy, so building a strong reputation was an important part of the report's development. One of the challenges of the report is presenting objective material, Perkins said.

Perkins and author/editor Michael Stevenson remain in close contact with the university, Breault's own engineers and the investment community to keep tabs on the latest technologies and optics ventures. All of the reporting for the publication is performed in Tucson with an eye toward local scientists, investors and events. This helps keep the focus on Tucson as "Optics Valley," a center of

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excellence for the optics industry. The title continues to be backed up by the University of Arizona, which has nearly 60 optics professors and continues to be one of the top optics schools in the world, Perkins said.

"People are very willing to work with us since we are tied to a high-tech company," Stevenson said.

Perkins also wanted the material to be easy to read and the scientific explanations to be easy to understand in order to draw the lay-person into the world of optics. The publication material is prepared by both Perkins and Stevenson to translate some of the research information into terms an investor might better understand.

"It is actually very enjoyable and very readable," said Harry George, a venture capitalist with Solstice Capital in Tucson. "I think it is on the right path."

George was featured in an interview on the Web site, but has subscribed since the publication launched. The publication recently began a series of interviews with venture capitalists to improve upon the report's two-way communication between investors and researchers.

"It is a tremendous publication," said Mike Proctor, director of corporate relations for the University of Arizona. "It is a clear added-value to what we're doing. It really gives us a lot of national and VC exposure."

The publication also adds value to Breault Research Organization, though the company makes no money off of the report. Bob Breault, founder of Breault Research Organization, agreed to fund the report out of the company's marketing budget. The report incorporated as its own company using those funds, because Breault both encourages spin-offs and wanted the publication to be independent of direct company influence.

Though the publication does not directly market Breault Research Organization, it is still a marketing tool for the company as it continues to present Tucson as "Optics Valley" to the rest of the world. Thus, the report keeps the company better connected throughout the scientific community.

"I think Bob saw that potential," Perkins said. "We chose to do something very different, very unique."

The publication's 27-month track record of reporting is enough to convince some of the publication's credibility. Now the report is cited in other national publications and Breault Research Organization receives more inquiries for optics information. Perkins even has received calls from as far away as Asia.

"It is very heartening to have them call us," Perkins said. "We're building connections on a different strata."

The publication turned into an online magazine about five months ago. Now the report is only published periodically, while the online content is updated as soon as new material becomes available.

"We have between 600 and 1,200 people coming to the Web site (weekly)," Stevenson said.

Perkins said the Web site hits got a big boost after a recent e-mail advertising campaign. Perkins said she plans to roll out another promotion for the Web site this month that could triple the number of hits, but declined to comment on the specifics. As the economy starts to improve and the circulation for the report continues to increase, Perkins also hopes to expand the services of the business.

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