

# Women in the industry

## Matrex CEO Jill Hebert: Skin in the Game

By Aleta Walther

Jill Hebert's 28-year journey from cabinetmaker to corporate CEO naturally had its dead ends and detours, but today the Exhibit Industry veteran is on the high-speed freeway of success as CEO of Matrex Exhibits Inc.

Hebert, is the founder and CEO of Chicago-based Matrex Exhibits. Matrex specializes in creating 3-dimensional brand environments/exhibits while also providing tradeshow support services that deliver quantifiable results. Today, Matrex has 70 employees and a blue-chip roster of about 50 clients, including Allscripts, Astellas, Bosch, CNH, Stryker and Wrigley.



**Jill Hilbert**

publications. In 2006, *Crain's Chicago Business*, the Windy City's leading business publication, listed Matrex as one of the city's *Largest Women-Owned Firms*. And, if that was not enough recognition, Matrex Exhibits was named a finalist in two categories for the 2009 *Stevie American Business Awards*, including the category of *Most Innovative Company of the Year*. The Stevie Awards honor the achievements of businesses and organizations worldwide.

While all of the recognition is well and good, Hebert does not let the glory

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In 2008, Hebert was honored as Ernst & Young's *Entrepreneur of the Year* and her accomplishments touted in *Smart Business Magazine* and other



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**A Matrex Creation.**

go to her head. The road from custom-cabinet maker to owner of a behemoth exhibit builder has been bumpy and bruising at times. She likes to think she paid her dues.

Hebert broke into the exhibit building industry working for Giltspur and went on to work for three other exhibit industry-related businesses before hitting the road on her own in 1987.

“I held various positions that provided me with a lot of exposure and business experience, including sales and

engineering,” said Hebert.

The first spark of what would become a burning passion for the tradeshow exhibit industry began smoldering at the first tradeshow Hebert attended; the vending machine manufacturer show at Chicago’s McCormick Place. As she walked the show aisles, she was awestruck by the size and elaborateness of some of the exhibits. However, it wasn’t long before she realized that while many companies were designing and building spectacular

exhibits, many lacked the customer service and quality craftsmanship that are the hallmarks of a successful company. She set out to hone these hallmarks into the lifeblood of Matrex Exhibits.

“I am so confident in our construction quality, communication skills and technology advancements that we offer a performance guarantee,” explained Hebert. “There is nobody else in the business that offers a performance guarantee. You could say we have skin in the game.”



people, processes and technology to drive program economy and efficiency.

**FieldScience** manages the flow, organization and delivery of field outcomes through on-floor Matrex ambassadors.

“LiveSciences is our total product package encompassing all aspects of delivering proven, measurable results to our clients through a variety of venues,” Hebert explained. “Our agency designs and provides a brand-centric focus blending social sciences, technology, quality production and flawless execution. Through LiveSciences we will improve existing structure or create a new venue to drive our clients’ return on investment with confirmed results.”

Building and sustaining Matrex through the recessions of the ‘80s ‘90s and today requires Hebert to stay on top of industry trends and customer preferences. Here is what she sees on the horizon.

“The exhibit industry is going through a cleansing cycle that will focus the value proposition of tradeshows back to accelerating the sales cycle while building deeper engagements with prospects and customers,” she said. “This is happening after an extended boom period when tradeshow activities were less disci-



With two young children under foot, Hebert founded Matrex in 1987 with a \$20,000 home equity loan and the philosophy "that deeds matter most." Today, Matrex is the exhibit industry's largest woman-owned business, and the tenth largest woman-owned business in Illinois.

"Matrex will continue to be on the leading edge of client services," Hebert projects with confidence. "We are spending marketing and advertising dollars today for strong gains tomorrow. We expect to increase revenue at least 20 percent in 2010 and expect our 5-year financial projections to double our revenue by increasing our offering."

Although not the largest exhibit builder and fabricator in the business, Hebert says Matrex does compete alongside the likes of industry leaders Freeman and GES. The company has created exhibits as large as 30,000 square feet and developed client programs costing "several million dollars."

Hebert said that Matrex's successful differentiation today lies in its "LiveSciences" program, which consists of five categories:

**DesignScience** employs industry and client specific research to create 3-D brand environments and integrates a measurement system into every project.

**PerformanceScience** uses interactive tools and training to engage and educate audiences while driving data collection. This category was launched as two separate divisions in April.

**ProductionScience** uses smart engineering and fabrication to promote a longer product life cycle while lowering the cost of ownership and environmental sustainability.

**ManagementScience** synchronizes

plined with little emphasis on accountability. Today, show management and producers must step up, validate and drive audience demographics. With audience accountability in place, agencies like Matrex can justify their marketing strategies and environment solutions with confidence and deliver strategies that build brand and drive deeper audience engagements."

She added that clients today expect companies like Matrex to provide programs that:

- Lower the cost of driving sales.
- Upsell current clients.
- Identify and educate new prospects for less.
- Engage more prospects in one day than any other medium.

"When done right, the tradeshow value proposition is unlike any other and will continue to grow," she added.

Other trends Hebert foresees:

- Alternative energy tradeshows will become the next growth market.
- Consumer shows will grow, perhaps hosted in some of the large, empty mega-store fronts.
- Virtual tradeshows will continue to grow based upon new technologies that foster better engagements, but will not replace face-to-face meetings.
- Show rotation and frequencies may decline in some industries while increasing others, depending on the industry's lifecycle.

• Improved awareness of when tradeshows make sense versus alternative means of event marketing.

"We are looking ahead, not toward the past," Hebert said in closing. "What our clients want from tradeshows are outcomes that exhibits produce; not the wood, laminate and fabric." ■