

DIANNA BRODINE, GAYLA & JEFF PETERSON, BECKY ARENSDORF

HEART OF THE ENTREPRENEUR

PETERSON MEDIA GROUP

By **KIM GRONNIGER**
Photo by **JOHN BURNS**

Topeka natives Jeff and Gayla Peterson launched their publishing company, Peterson Publications, in 1992 in the basement of their Olathe home before eventually relocating their burgeoning business to the capital city in 1999. The intergenerational family company has continued to evolve, and the couple renamed it Peterson Media Group two years ago to better reflect its multifaceted communications focus.

Jeff and Gayla serve as president and vice president, respectively.

“As time went on, we realized potential in association magazine publishing.”

—Jeff Peterson
President
Peterson Media Group

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL EPIPHANY

Through his employment as a marketing manager for Bunting Magnetics in Newton, Kansas, and later for USE Foils Inc. in Overland Park, Jeff’s familiarity with manufacturing operations and association affiliations led to an entrepreneurial epiphany.

“My background gave me the idea that industrial companies needed help communicating with other businesses, especially since most advertising agencies at that time were mainly focused on television and radio promotions for consumers,” he said.

Jeff was able to parlay his experience into a consulting business focused on business-to-business marketing. Soon after, the Foil & Specialty Effects Association that he was involved in at USE Foils

contacted him about helping with a start-up magazine, the impetus for the Petersons’ publication business. Jeff handled advertising sales and editorial responsibilities and Gayla, a former social worker, handled operations for their new business.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Peterson Media Group became an extended family affair. After Jeff’s mother, Vicki Peterson, retired as a manager with AT&T, she sold ads for the company beginning in 1995 and assisted with the launch of the association’s first magazine that year. The Petersons’ son, Blake, joined the company two years ago as a national sales manager for four association-based magazines.

“Soon after producing the first magazine for the Foil & Special Effects



Peterson Media Group provides a full range of client support for trade and manufacturing publications.

Association, we started working on the Topeka Visitors Guide and more publication opportunities followed,” Jeff said.

Jeff credits his mother with the company’s successful early launch into travel guides.

“Through her various professional contacts, she helped us land the Topeka publication and additional travel guides in Wichita, Olathe and Kansas City, Kansas,” he said. “As time went on, we realized potential in association magazine publishing and transitioned away from travel.”

Today the company has 11 local, regional and national association clients, including the Kansas Bar Association, the Kansas Dental Association, and the Kansas Society of Association Executives.

“Most of our publications are manufacturing based across multiple industries,” Jeff said. “One of our association magazines uses ultra-violet

technology to disinfect hospitals, airports and medical offices and our advertising really took off during the pandemic when everyone was looking for a solution.”

Peterson Media Group provides a full range of client support, including writing, editing, design, layout, advertising sales, and digital components, including developing separate websites with additional content and monthly e-newsletters.

“We found our niche with small- and medium-sized associations that wanted to have a publication that could reach members and potential members with educational and marketing information on a regular basis,” Jeff said. “It’s a win-win for our clients because they love the idea of having a publication, but don’t have the staff to create and publish one. It’s gratifying for us to be able to partner with them for whatever need they have.”

For example, Peterson said Kansas Electric Cooperatives Inc. publishes its own magazine, “Kansas Country Living,” but relies on Peterson Media Group to manage its advertising sales.

Jeff said the company’s Topeka location is a logistical advantage for the company since clients are located across the country.

“We attend a lot of trade shows and conferences to distribute magazines and visit with our advertisers, so being here makes travel easier,” Jeff said.

“One of the great things about being a family-owned company is that we can travel places together,” Gayla added.

EMPLOYEES ARE FAMILY TOO

The couple’s appreciation for family extends to their employee base too.

“It’s a challenge for a lot of companies to keep good people in today’s environment, but we’ve

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“We raised our children in this business, and we were involved in all of their activities and want our employees to have the same flexibility and opportunity.”

—**Gayla Peterson**
Vice President
Peterson Media Group

been able to retain many of our employees because we have a family first philosophy,” Gayla said. “We raised our children in this business, and we were involved in all of their activities and want our employees to have the same flexibility and opportunity.”

As a testament to the Petersons’ employment practices, four employees have lengthy tenures: Brenda Schell, office manager, Gayla’s aunt, and the Petersons’ first hire, 26 years; Becky Arensdorf, vice president, design, 22 years; Dianna

Brodine, vice president of operations, 18 years; and Janet Dunnichay, national sales manager, 14 years.

“Becky oversees all of our design-related activities and Dianna is in charge of all the editorial and other operations for our magazines,” Jeff said. “They are both the backbone of everything we do here.”

Peterson Media Group also applies its expertise to a couple of pro bono programs for Child Care Aware’s Designers Showhouse and CASA of Shawnee County’s Home for the Holidays event. Although Vicki retired this summer, Jeff said she will still help with ad sales for the Homes for the Holidays publication.

“She feels strongly about the cause and volunteers to put the piece together each year,” Jeff said. “She’s not ready to give this one up.”

THE FUTURE OF MAGAZINES

Given the nature of their business, the Petersons sometimes get asked about their thoughts on the future of magazines as many commercial titles have ceased publication. Both Petersons believe their professional niche is a healthy one.

“Newspapers are having to reinvent themselves because they’re not the way people get the latest news anymore,” Jeff said. “But our association magazines deliver technical education instead of breaking news and readers expect the graphics, photographs, and lengthier articles we provide. People are on their

laptops and phones all day and many of them want that tactile sensation of paper. Digital fatigue is a real thing.”

Whether for work or pleasure, both Jeff and Gayla read magazines for information as well as for design inspiration for positioning data for their clients.

“Magazines are a relaxing option,” Gayla said. “You can pick one up when you’re ready to read it and then return to it if you want to retrieve information rather than conducting an online search.”

BUSINESS & HOME LIFE BOUNDARIES

Although raising a family and running a business together can be stressful for some couples, the Petersons had a serendipitous test run as Pittsburg State University students working together at a small restaurant and bar while dating.

“I waited tables and Jeff cooked, so when we started our business, we knew we could do it and not strangle each other... but there are moments,” Gayla said, laughing.

Jeff credits family members’ willingness to set and respect boundaries as a critical practice to ensure their successful navigation as family members and business colleagues.

“When work is done for the day, we try not to talk about it at home,” Jeff said. “That’s not always easy, but I believe that it has allowed us all to work together so well.” TK