

## Waltham firm helps kiosk retailers find customers at workplaces

By Andrew J. Manuse/ Daily News Staff  
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**D**uring her lunch break at Clock Tower Place in Maynard last Wednesday, Angie Cunniff, a DeVA Systems Group employee at the office complex, was buying shoes at half price.

Cunniff, one of about 3,500 employees that work at the 100 companies at Clock Tower Place, said she paid Shoe Explosion owner Debra Barry \$38 for the same pair of shoes she saw for \$80 at local retail shoe stores.

Barry runs her business out of her Vernon, Conn., home. Because she has no overhead costs, she can offer good prices to customers like Cunniff. Barry, who used to work in the corporate world, left to start her own shoe business because selling shoes "is like one big party all day."

Barry has sold her shoes "five or six days a week" at about 100 corporate parks since May, thanks to her acquaintance with Sharon O'Rourke and her Waltham-based business, Kiosk Connections.

O'Rourke, who started Kiosk Connections in January 2005, now has a database of 700 specialty vendors like Barry, and 400 of them are currently engaged in business with her.

About 98 percent of Kiosk Connections' client vendors are "stores without walls, and because they don't have the overhead of stores, rent and electricity, they are able to offer merchandise at an attractive price," O'Rourke said. Because of the lower costs, the vendors are able to pay O'Rourke a fee, she said, part of which goes to the office park for the space.

O'Rourke said employees have very little time to shop these days, and bringing different vendors into office parks gives them a convenient shopping experience during their breaks.

Besides Maynard, O'Rourke operates vendor programs at companies in Taunton, Chelsea and Weston, where she gained her first partner, Lucent Technologies Inc., right after starting the business. She's also building a group of core office park partners in Connecticut and Rhode Island, and said she hopes to spread to northern New England as well.

"I've had some companies try it during the holidays, and it's been so well received by employees they agree to have it on a regular basis," O'Rourke said. "There's always something with employees. There's anniversaries, there's birthdays, there's times when someone did something special and you want to do something special back."

With the host company, O'Rourke designs a custom program that specifies the frequency vendors will come and which type of vendors. Larger venues, with as many as 5,000 employees, might host multiple vendors every day, while smaller companies of fewer than 300 people might host one different vendor, once a week, or less often, she said.

Kiosk Connection's program with Wellesley Management, the company that controls Clock Tower Place, calls for different vendors once a week (and more frequently during the Christmas shopping season) for four hours around lunch hour in the pavilion right next to the office park's cafeteria.

O'Rourke said she approached Joe Mullin, a public relations official at Wellesley Management, with the concept last September and he signed on pretty quickly.

"Sharon O'Rourke is terrific," Mullin said last week. "She does a great job."

Mullin said Wellesley Management doesn't make money on the deal, but does charge a small fee to Kiosk Connections that pays custodians to set up the tables and chairs. They're set up in a way that gives vendors access to a lot of people.

At a minimum, 500 people use the Clock Tower Place cafeteria each day, Mullin said, though on rainy or snowy days even more people, who would normally walk to Maynard downtown restaurants, eat there.

"We see it more as an amenity for the tenants that adds to their advantages of being here at Clock Tower Place," Mullin said of the vendors. "Sharon brought to our attention that she could bring focused vendors, which could bring shopping alternatives to employees they couldn't get at the office park or around town."

The employees at Clock Tower Place's 100 companies can log on to O'Rourke's Web site and enter a password to find out what vendors are coming in to the pavilion each week, so they can plan ahead.

Sarah Mleziva, who works at Boardwalk Marketing Group Inc. at 4 Clock Tower Place, said she checks the Web site to find out when some of her favorite vendors are coming back.

"I like to shop, but I don't like malls," Mleziva said. "I don't like driving to malls, I don't like walking in malls. This is convenient and they have some really interesting vendors in here."

Mleziva, who was eyeing shoes at Barry's Shoe Explosion table last week, said the vendors are set up in the perfect spot so she can stop by during lunch and not miss any work.

O'Rourke's concept is relatively new. Andrew Sterling, a spokesman for the National Association of Industrial & Office Properties, said the Virginia-based association had never heard of the concept. Tamara Small, a spokeswoman for the group's chapter in Massachusetts, hadn't heard about it either.

Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, said he knows that kiosk businesses are growing in popularity in malls but he didn't know they were spreading into office parks as well.

"I think it's great. It's taking one step further the lunchtime food cart concept," Hurst said. "And hey, our office is near Downtown Crossing (in Boston). One of the main things people do at lunch is shop. If you're stranded at an office park, only have 30 minutes for lunch and the mall is too far, this is interesting."

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