



Carmelle Jensen, Principal/CEO of CCG, says business is currently as good as it's ever been for her firm in Salt Lake City's A/E/C market. (photo by Dana Sohm; project photos courtesy CCG).



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Riding the Wave

CCG is rolling along in-step with Utah's thriving economy as it celebrates 30 years serving the A/E/C industry.

By Brad Fullmer

CCG Principal/CEO Carmelle Jensen breaks into a broad grin when asked about Utah's red-hot – and nationally recognized – economy, spurring the commercial office furniture company she founded in 1987 to new heights.

"We live in Utah – pick up any magazine, you'll see we're the place to be!" she marvels. "Who would've thought? The technology companies that have come into the state have been amazing."

Jensen and her Salt Lake-based firm are riding high on the commercial office/tenant improvement (TI) wave cresting throughout the Wasatch Front, with record-level revenues the past two years and a rosy outlook for 2018 and beyond.

Bob Kmetzsch, Director, Business Development for CCG since 2012, said the firm's business closely mirrors how the

economy is doing as a whole. In 2016, CCG experienced what he called a significant spike in revenues, and that level has been maintained through 2017.

"We've gone into each year with a target of 10% growth, and the past two to three years we've had 15% or better growth in certain areas," said Kmetzsch. "This year we're on track to match that number."

The company consists of a Commercial Division, a Residential Division, and Source One Installation, a wholly-owned service company that installs products for both divisions, along with being outsourced on other projects.

Can-Do Attitude Spurs Business Ownership

A native of Los Angeles, Jensen earned a degree in fashion design from West Valley College of Design in L.A., before coming to the Beehive State in part because of her husband Todd's "love of Utah". She also studied interior design at Brigham Young University and business management at the University of Phoenix, and began working for a now-defunct commercial office furniture dealership in Salt Lake in the late 70s, eventually running its interior design division.

After seven-plus years, Jensen and the firm didn't see eye-to-eye on a number

of issues, and she decided to take her experience and passion for the industry and start CCG in 1987.

"When we separated ways, I figured it was time to start my own deal," Jensen said. "I knew what I could do."

The firm ultimately became a full-fledged Haworth dealer, but not before several rounds of negotiations with different levels of executives of the Holland, Michigan-based firm.

She put together a comprehensive business plan to be the Haworth distributor for Utah, and at first pitched it to the Denver regional office. She was flatly told the company wasn't looking >>



Corporate offices like Pluralsight in Farmington (left, bottom right) and Moreton & Company in Salt Lake illustrate the modern offerings of the firm's Haworth line. (courtesy CCG)



Rolling with Technology

A notable project for CCG during the early recession period was a large installation for Boart Longyear's corporate office in Salt Lake. Jensen remembers that project in part because of its size and scope, but also because it illustrates how products have been morphing the past decade into systems with far greater flexibility and sustainability.

"The commercial office furniture industry has gone through a dramatic

transformation over the last 10 years by workplace trends that are moving away from stamped out cubicle spaces to open workplace environments," said Jensen. "It is supported by a high level of collaboration and breakout areas and includes spaces that are highly flexible and moveable once occupancy has occurred."

To illustrate her comment, Jensen points to her own office as to how interior office spaces can change on the fly, literally within hours.

"We have these architectural walls on top of carpet and could break it down in one night and make it into 10 workstations," she says. "Access flooring allows you to pull up carpet tiles and access electrical systems. "We did a huge install for Boart Longyear and ended up having to make a significant change to one of the executive offices in one night. As companies are growing and expanding, they're looking for more flexible solutions." >>

for another distribution channel, even though Jensen was local and knew she could perform vastly better. Undeterred, she steered her resolve and hopped a flight to Chicago to attend a huge commercial office furniture tradeshow, with the intent of pitching her ideas to top company brass.

"I met with Haworth executives above the level of those in Denver and said 'here is the business plan - you're nuts not to do this. There's (poor) distribution (in Salt Lake), you should take a look at this,'" she recalled.

She impressed the executives and got the dealership, but business was anything but brisk during those early years.

"It was terrible," she said of the economy of the late 80s, "but I didn't know

any better. I remember it being extremely hard. It took a lot of tenacity, drive and push to just hang in there."

Jensen shrugs her shoulders when asked where she gets her determination, her resolve to push back during difficult times. "Some people are just wired that way," she says, nonchalantly.

Jensen's business acumen and forward thinking came in handy prior to the recession in 2008, allowing the firm to make shrewd strategic moves ahead of the crash so it could better handle the next few turbulent years. In the fall of that year the firm made the difficult decision to lay off some staff, despite being relatively busy at that moment.

"I felt like we needed to pull back

and so we did, and within 90 days the implosion was public and everywhere," Jensen recalled. "Suddenly everybody was worth significantly less than the week before. For whatever reason we got out of it without losing money, which truly is a miracle. I'm not going to say we did much more than break even, but we made it through. We concentrated heavily on the service side; it became very important to us."

"We had a strong '08 and a fairly good '09 and were able to weather the storm because of Carmelle's good management decisions prior to that," said Justin Bell, COO of the firm since 1999. "We were insulated somewhat in the Intermountain West."

Jensen also highlighted that Haworth went through a major transition of all product lines in the last decade, so that all finishes, fabrics and connections fit together seamlessly in various design realms.

“They revamped all product lines into what they term the ‘integrated palette’ so that no matter what product line you have, they are all interchangeable, almost like Legos,” said Jensen.

Kmetzsch is also ecstatic over the integrated nature of modern product lines, which aids speed of installation, overall cost, and sustainability.

“It’s like tilt-up construction, as a way to describe it,” he said. “Walls are erected as acoustical, unitized pieces that are put into place. You have the ability to put it directly on the carpet and tie into the ceiling grid, without damaging any product. That is key to a demountable wall. It’s not stick-built construction, it’s one unitized piece.”

On the recent Ken Garff Corporate office remodel in Salt Lake City, Kmetzsch said three floors of demountable wall units were installed in one month, which he called “unprecedented”. On the mammoth CHG Healthcare Headquarters in Midvale (1,700 workstations), CCG installed a mile’s worth of wall in three months. Another client recently moved its entire office – walls and all – to the 111 Main tower in downtown Salt Lake, saving significant TI costs.

“We’re seeing more architects and designers request that type of product just because it’s an environmental statement,” he added. “You can reuse and repurpose it, it saves time in the construction schedule, and it is equal to the cost of traditional drywall and framing systems.”

Kmetzsch said 2018 will be another busy, profitable year, based on current backlog and expected economic activity.

“We trend with the market and Utah is a very vibrant and healthy place to work and grow,” he said. “I’ve never seen more ‘big’ projects as it relates to this market. Rather than 100-150 workstation offices, we’re seeing 400-500 workstation offices. Companies are coming to Utah for the workforce and the economy. We’re excited about what’s going on – there are a lot of opportunities out there.” ■

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