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## Mid-Columbia Small Business of the Year Awards

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Ever wonder what it takes to win an award as a Mid-Columbia Small Business of the Year? Twelve local business owners could answer that question with pride. They won the award over the past four years for exceptional customer service, outstanding treatment of employees and community relations.

The Alliance of Mid-Columbia Chambers coordinates the competition, giving gold, silver and bronze awards annually to the most outstanding businesses. Benton and Franklin county businesses with fewer than 100 employees are eligible. Judges use a detailed rating system that includes a site visit. In this column, four past winners describe the qualities that earned them the prestigious award.

Exemplary customer service drives Brian Johnson, co-owner of Motoring Services, Inc., a Richland auto services company. "I realized years ago that instead of expecting customers to conform to our business rules, we must continuously change to meet their needs," Johnson said. Now, Motoring Services tracks more than 150 aspects of the business each month, from timely repair completion to profit and loss statements. The company belongs to a national organization of 17 automotive businesses, which benchmark and compare performance of each member's business. The attention to quality has paid off. Last year, Johnson's company grew by 14 percent and increased its net profit by six percent. Customer service also is number one for the Benton Rural Electric Association, but in a different way. "We are consumer-owned, which makes us extremely responsive to our members' requirements and needs," said Chuck Dawsey, manger of the Prosser-based electric utility. For example, about two years ago some of their rural community members were unable to get Internet service without making a long-distance call. In response, Benton REA created the Benton REA PowerNET, which leases lines from telephone companies to provide Internet access from Yakima to the Tri-Cities with a local phone call.

All the winning business owners said that a team-oriented, open atmosphere fosters happy, enthusiastic employees. Said Kelly Edwards, owner of NRG Resources, "We don't believe in job titles. Everyone is there for a common goal, and all jobs are equally important." The Benton City company creates printing samples that Hewlett-Packard uses to sell its printer equipment worldwide.

Talking together regularly as a group helps encourage collaboration, owners said. "The whole office gets together informally most Fridays to talk about design projects and issues," said Tere Thornhill of the Pasco architectural firm Terence L. Thornhill, Architect, Inc.

All the winning businesses are highly involved in their communities, both through corporate contributions and employee donations of time and talent. Contributions have ranged from financing and design for local facilities to on-site shadowing programs that give high-school students a feel for various careers. Winning the award has translated into continued business success, the owners said. Many use

the award in their marketing and advertising programs, and Dawsey of Benton REA said "it was a great shot in the arm for our employees." Businesses can be nominated for this year's awards until April 21, 2000. "Anyone can nominate a business, including employees, customers, suppliers, partners, regulators and even the businesses themselves," said Debbie Bone-Harris, co-coordinator of this year's event. Bone-Harris is with Business LINKS of Washington State University Tri-Cities and CH2M Hill Hanford Group.

Get nomination forms from the local Chambers of Commerce, Tri-City Industrial Development Council or call Debbie Bone-Harris at 372-7613. This year's sponsors include CH2M Hill Hanford Group, Inc., Columbia Trust, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory and other local organizations. Winners will be announced at a banquet on Thursday, May 18 at the Tower Inn in Richland.