



## **People in Business: UP CLOSE / CAROLYN CARRINGTON, owner of SOHO Hero: Helping hand**

**Ex-corporate warrior now provides services to small businesses, one-person companies**

Michael E. Kanell - Staff  
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There is life after corporate America.

After a more than three decades in the suites, sales missions and corporate cultures of IBM and Coca-Cola, Carolyn Carrington has found a haven in small business, running her own small shop that caters to other small businesses.

Carrington is the owner of SOHO Hero, a service center meant to provide the kind of shipping, printing, binding and design help that a small or single-person company would not have handy.

The name comes from the acronym: small office, home office.

The Suwanee store is a franchise, part of the 22-store chain run by the Alpharetta parent. When the idea was launched in 1995, the stores were called Mail and More. They offered help with projects, copying, printing, designing and such. But most potential customers focused on the first word, said founder Chris Kouloukas.

Last June, the name was changed to SOHO Hero, he said. "We saw the market shifting, and we wanted a brand that better connected. Not only with our customers but with our operators. As Mail and More, we could never overcome the name."

Franchises cost around \$202,000. Refugees from corporate America are often candidates for them, frequently using money from a self-directed IRA, Kouloukas said.

After he had decided to open a store in Suwanee and went searching for owners, he found Carrington. Her store, tucked into the Publix shopping center, opened Oct. 17.

Originally from Montrose in suburban New York, Carrington grew up with eight brothers and two sisters and a father who ran his own company selling coal, oil and other fuels.

Q: How do you get here to be running this shop?

A: I worked for Coke for eight years as a national account executive. My primary

account was Darden Restaurants. Coke went through its downsizing, rightsizing --  
- whatever you want to call it.

I worked with a friend for two years, but then I knew they were going to be having  
some changes. I grew up with eight brothers and two sisters, and a lot of them are  
entrepreneurs. And my father was an entrepreneur. So I thought, the next time I  
leave a company I'm going to do something of my own.

Q: That wasn't a comedown, to go from the huge company?

A: I knew I wanted to start a business. I'd been thinking about it for three years.  
People sometimes look at downsizing as a bad thing, but for me it was  
opportunity. It provided me with the finances so I could do something different.

Q: So what is the business? Where is the demand for what you do?

A: I had someone come in. Their child had a project for school, and they were  
making a game board for school. They walked in with the pieces to the game and  
they needed them to be laminated. This was a woman who lives in the  
neighborhood and had been in before, so she understood the resources we have.

Most of our clients are people with small, home offices, so they don't have the kind  
of equipment we have here to get the job done. A lot of people walk in and they  
don't necessarily know what they need. And my background came into play here  
in what I do.

Q: What is that connection between what you have always done and what you are  
doing now?

A: I always become involved with the customer. That is what I did with Coke and  
with IBM. So the feedback I want at the end of the day is to know, are my  
customers satisfied?

Customers are very verbal. They will let you know when you do a good job. They  
will let you know when you don't do a good job.

Q: What kind of attitude do you need to run this business?

A: I think you have to seriously like people and you have to be very customer-  
focused. And you have to like what you do. When a person walks into the store, it  
is a matter of helping them to get the job done. I want them to be happy with it. I  
want them to be ecstatic.

Q: You said your husband works here, too, and that you have a part-time  
manager. But you want to add another one, right? So when you hire, what are you  
looking for?

A: I don't want someone who is not patient. A lot of our clients come in and they  
don't necessarily know what they want to do. You have to ask questions. You  
have to be patient.

They come in and say, 'You're not a shipping store. What are you?' Then they see  
the media wall here, the banners and posters, and say 'Can you do that for me?'

Q: Is it hard to come into an ongoing franchise?

A: No. From my perspective, they already have the model. I don't have to get the bumps and the bruises myself.

Q: But isn't that limiting in some ways?

A: Oh, no. At the end of the day, the buck stops here. Yes, I'm part of a franchise, but this is my business. These are my clients.

Q: But that model you mentioned, aren't you required to conform?

A: I bought into a franchise. I expected it to have a certain look and feel. Chris holds me to that --- but I also bought into that. Part of going into business for myself has to do with the people I will be in business with. Not only was Chris looking at me, I also looked at him.

Q: Isn't it different, though, from your corporate experience? Is it better?

A: It's a different experience because it's my business. [Laughs] There is an accountability. I call the shots. And it's different because I am serving the community I live in. I'm involved in their lives.

And I live three miles away from here. I don't have much of a commute.

Q: Who comes in here?

A: We are basically a neighborhood and community business.

We get eBay users. We get architects. We get some CEOs. It is amazing how many 'sohos' there are. They tend to be 30 and up, maybe 40 and up. We have a mature clientele. Usually they are in business, although we get some individuals, some moms. Maybe a 60-40 split --- that is, about 60 percent male.

We have quite a few people in sales. We have a lot of people who own their own business. We get a lot of real estate agents. They want fliers or banners or signs ...

We have some people who are telecommuting. Well, for many years, I was a telecommuter. When I was in sales I had a home office. [Laughs] I still have a home office.

THE CAROLYN CARRINGTON FILE

Age: 52

Home: Duluth

Family: Husband, Duke Carrington. Son, Kelsey, married and living in Northridge, Calif.

Hobbies: Tennis, twice a week in season with the Atlanta Lawn Tennis

Association; rides a motorcycle with Duke. Hers: a 700 Suzuki.

Most recent book: "The Da Vinci Code"

Music of choice: Soft jazz

Favorite vacation spot: Florence, Italy

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