

Clearing the clutter

Lawyers are behind the surge in telephone calls at Anna Bradley's home-based business this year. She is getting the calls based on 16 years of building a reputation for finding the faults in websites that are inaccessible to people with disabilities.

Bradley was overcoming her own disability and living with her parents after illness forced her to give up a first career as an information technology specialist, when she founded Criterion 508 Solutions Inc. The company was inspired by a brief article she found in a magazine focused on federal contracting.

Fun reading? Probably not for many, but it says something about a woman who is very much in the weeds of computer technology and the business prospects that can flourish there.

It says something, but not all there is to say about Bradley.

She is a woman so focused on easing the way for people with disabilities that she designed her Johnston home so that it would be navigable inside and out by the disabled. The stairwell to her basement that is part office and part family room is equipped with a wheelchair lift. Her driveway is at an angle that accommodates ramps that extend from vehicles outfitted for people with handicaps. The layout inside is in a semicircle to allow unobstructed passage. Doorways are extra-wide.

When needed, the house can accommodate roughly a dozen employees who work from their own homes but show up for training sessions. About half of those workers have various visual, hearing and other physical disabilities.

Criterion 508 is all about finding the snippets of code that prevent people with disabilities from navigating websites and applications. Lawyers have caught on that the federal government is serious about enforcing various federal laws that require an accessible-to-all Internet. As a result, Bradley is busier so far this year than all of last year fielding calls from companies threatened with lawsuits.

Among many things, Bradley is a heck of a good storyteller, and the story of how she got to where she is today is best told from the beginning.

Lessons from a salesman

The most important business lesson Bradley received came when she was a 7-year-old ride-along in her father's Chrysler Newport.

Irving Bradley worked for 25 years for the federal government, then took a job selling construction tools and fasteners for Bostitch. Anna Bradley would ride along on the sales calls, wait patiently in the car while dad talked business, then pay close attention when her dad returned to the car and analyzed what had just happened.

Good business boiled down to understanding the needs of customers. At times, maybe the customer really didn't know what they needed. Telling them was good business. But the best business was providing stellar customer service.

Irving Bradley transitioned from salesman to owner of Bradley Fastener and Supply Inc., a company he founded in 1990 and operated along with his wife, Esther. It was a family operation, Anna Bradley said.

When the big-box home repair and tool supply stores opened, that attention to customer service helped him stay in business.

The lesson was that if you deliver fanatical customer service and support, you can charge anything you want, Anna Bradley said.

“Even though his nails and fasteners were more expensive than what you would spend at Home Depot, if they were running a framing crew and their compressor went down, my dad would go out, he would pick up the old compressor, leave them with a new compressor, take it home and fix it and switch it later. If they are buying their nails from Home Depot, they take it in, they wait for a week to have it fixed. You can’t have a crew standing around for a week,” she said.

Irving Bradley understood what was important to the business owners who were involved in home construction, multifamily construction, commercial construction.

“He zeroed in on making sure that he addressed those issues when no one else could. When other small businesses were being pushed out, he was thriving,” Anna Bradley said. “When I started my company, that was the number one characteristic of the company, strength of the company that I pushed, that I indoctrinated my employees to push, was fanatical customer support. Not only are we the experts, not only are we the best at what we do, and we’re competitive in pricing, it’s got to be the most enjoyable project you’ve ever had.”

And that Chrysler Newport is a lesson in and of itself, she said.

Her dad “loved Cadillacs, but didn’t buy one until after he retired. He always cautioned that it was bad business for a salesman to drive up to a customer’s construction site in an expensive car. He said it was inevitable the customer would assume he was paying for the luxury car due to excessive prices and try to dicker you down.”

Today, his daughter drives a 1997 Saturn Outlook.

Anna Bradley also learned a little about being self-sufficient during those growing-up years.

The entire family helped Mom and Dad at in the tool supply business. It also chipped in during the years that Irving Bradley managed what is now called Buccaneers Arena at 73rd Street and Hickman Avenue in Urbandale.

They sharpened skates, they operated the Zamboni, they repaired equipment, they put the ice in, they took the ice out, Anna Bradley said.

Irving Bradley used his understanding of government contracting to secure federal grants that helped keep the operation going.

“I was a rink rat,” she said. “I had a front-row seat to what it takes to run a successful program.”

She also developed a lifelong fascination with hockey. By the time she was 10, she told her dad that she was tired of “skating in circles.” She wanted to play hockey. At the time, the idea of girls in hockey gear would have been the “equivalent of women’s wrestling,” she said.

Irving Bradley formed a hockey league for girls, the first in Iowa, Anna Bradley said. By the time she graduated from high school, when the players got bigger, stronger and faster, she was certified as a referee for bantam league matches.

When she went off to college at Iowa State University, she found an apartment near an ice arena and joined a recreational hockey league. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in history in 1989. It would be 23 years, after her father's death in 2012, before she returned to the ice rink.

From security guard to systems technician

Bradley left college with the idea that she wanted to join the Iowa State Patrol. State budget cuts brought an end to that dream, she said.

Instead, she found two jobs. She worked as a security guard at what was then Pioneer Hi-Bred International and she moonlighted as a security guard at what was then Methodist Hospital. She thought she was killing time until the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy accepted another class of potential state troopers.

Bradley was able to drop the job at Methodist Hospital after taking a job in the Pioneer plant breeding mailroom. She was a mailroom clerk by day and a security guard for the company by night.

At the time, Pioneer was distributing networked personal computers to its employees, minus the training necessary to operating them.

"I saw an opportunity there," Bradley said.

She bought her own personal computer, charged it to her credit card, and when it arrived at her home she tore it apart and put it back together.

"It worked. I read the manual, and that was the difference. Word got around (Pioneer) that if you have any trouble, call the mailroom clerk in plant breeding," she said.

Her real break came when she got a call from Pioneer's engineering group, where there was a problem coaxing a plotter printer into operation. She noticed that the printer drivers had not been installed. Problem solved. She said she was offered a job as a systems analyst.

Bradley said she found out that the company was flying people around the world to conduct refresher courses on how to operate seed drying systems.

"That seemed like an inefficient way to keep people's skills up to date," she said.

She proposed interactive training using an early format of the CD and DVD. The discs could be produced by a Des Moines company. Distributing them would be less expensive than distributing people around the globe.

"I told them it would cost \$40,000, and they said, 'Do it,' " she said. "That's the way Pioneer operated back then.

The training program led to a trip to a Pioneer board meeting in Naples, Fla. She got to travel on a private jet with President, Chairman and CEO Tom Urban. After she made a presentation to the board, she was invited to stay for the remainder of the meeting.

"I watched these guys all day doing what executives do and what boards of directors do," she said. "That was an amazing opportunity. That's the way corporations worked then. They don't work that way anymore."

Bradley also learned at one point that the elderly man who brought a brown-bag lunch to the cafeteria day in and day out was Raymond Baker, whom founder Henry Wallace had named as the company's first leader of its plant breeding operation. During the days he had lunch with Bradley, he was maintaining a small research plot.

"Back then, it didn't matter if you were a mailroom clerk; you weren't pigeonholed," she said. "If you had an idea, people were willing to listen. I think it's because, let's face it, at Pioneer everybody and their dog has a Ph.D. It's nothing special, perhaps, when you've spent your day walking around in the mud at a research field — all pretense kind of goes out the window. It was a unique time, and it was a unique opportunity."

The Internet was a 'mouth dropper'

Bradley was smitten enough by the use of technology in training that she pursued a master's degree in adult education, training and development at Drake University.

She met another graduate student who worked for United Parcel Service. At the time, the company was launching a tracking system that would follow packages via the Internet.

"I asked what is the Internet, what is a worldwide network? I went to the library and read about it," Bradley said. "My mouth just dropped. I said this is going to change everything."

She offered seminars on the World Wide Web. She explored how Pioneer could use the Internet for marketing and sales.

During a company picnic, she fell and struck her head on concrete. She didn't know it yet, but she had suffered the first of what was going to be years of medical issues that would give her insight into the challenges faced by people with disabilities.

But she also had a career to build.

Bradley's seminars on the Internet caught the attention of Principal Financial Group Inc., which was "a little bit ahead of the pack" in adopting new technologies and hired her in 1994, she said.

"Getting people to understand that the world was going to change very significantly, and how to position themselves to fit in and add value to the business when the changes took place, that was tough. You still had people who believed the PC still had no place in the home," she said.

Two years after starting at Principal, Bradley was diagnosed with cancer.

Still, doors were opening rapidly for her. From Principal, she went to work for what is now called RSM US LLP, the national auditing and consulting firm.

She was making good money and blazing away on her career in information technology. She also was adding to her educational resume, eventually earning a doctorate degree from Drake University in educational leadership and administration.

In 2000, she went to work for Florida Power & Light Co., where she was charged with getting a dozen or so corporate vice presidents to agree on a centralized corporate website.

Her assignment with Florida Power & Light was falling together in the form of a website where people

could connect and disconnect their services, pay their bills and schedule an energy audit via computer.

To accommodate a busy lifestyle, she owned homes in Florida and Beavertdale. She drove an expensive sport utility vehicle.

Illness and success in a small business

Then, "I got sick," Bradley said.

There was the head injury in 1992 and severe headaches that followed. In 1996 she was diagnosed with cancer. The cancer had gone undiagnosed for a couple of years, she said. It was preceded by years of intense pain.

At Florida Power & Light, "I was going to work at 5 a.m., I was getting home at 9 p.m. I very seldom saw the sunshine, except on weekends." She developed an infection around her heart that led to several months of bed rest.

"I couldn't work 80, 60, 20 hours a week," she said. She learned that the definition of disability was broader than the common perception that an ailment leaves you bound to wheelchair.

She sold her houses. She moved in with her parents. She was 35 and broke.

"I was kind of stuck in my old bedroom that I grew up in," she said.

In 2007, Bradley told an interviewer with Inc. magazine, "When God was handing out brains, common sense and business acumen, I was at the front of the line. But when he was handing out good health, I must have been at a bar or a party somewhere because I certainly didn't get much."

At her parent's home in Urbandale, her brains and business acumen kicked in while she was reading an article about federal rules that were going to take effect for vendors wanting to do work for the federal government.

Under congressional amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, both federal agencies and companies doing business with the federal government had to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. That included people who were sight and hearing impaired. The new section of the Rehabilitation Act was numbered 508.

"I thought, this is up my alley," Bradley said. She had pressed for Federal Power & Light's website to be accessible. She knew what she was doing. She could read and write computer code, and she could find and fix the elements necessary in that abstract language to open websites to the disabled.

The business could be operated from home, and her workers could work out of their homes.

She started the business with a cellphone, a Hewlett Packard PC and a 56k modem.

She contacted the Small Business Administration to find out exactly how to put together a business. She figured that over time the company might grow to a behemoth in a "four- or five-story office building." After all, she would have the area of auditing and determining whether websites were accessible virtually all to herself. These days, there are about six "serious competitors," she said.

An SBA consultant persuaded her to stay with a smaller-scale operation, telling her she wouldn't have to

put up with organizational and bureaucratic issues she has no taste for, she said. "I decided on a boutique operation that does it better than anybody else, offers customer service at a level nobody else can. So that became the new vision for what the company would evolve into."

She got out of the house, flying to Washington, D.C., every two weeks or so and "pounding the pavement" and learning about federal contracting.

"What made the biggest difference was the the gatekeepers of Section 508 were the procurement officers, they were the ones who made sure federal contracts adhered to this standard," Bradley said.

They were not computer or software specialists. What they needed was the ability to buy software, for example, that had been audited and carried a seal of approval of sorts.

"The contractors could give their certification to procurement officers; they file it away, and they don't worry about it," she said.

For the federal government, part of the issue with accessibility is that it employs a large number of people with disabilities. The private sector is learning that with the aging of the population, many of their workers will develop impairments that will hinder their ability to do their jobs.

"After (the Great Recession), the option to retire is off the table for a lot of people, and some people don't want to fully retire, they want to stay active," Bradley said. "Corporate America will be dealing with workforce that is older by 10 years than what it's been used to."

As an example of the impairments that go with that scenario, 50 percent of people over age 65 develop visual issues, Bradley said.

A growing issue in private business

The fact that the phone is ringing is a sure sign that Internet accessibility issues have spread from the public sector to private business, especially those engaged in any form of e-commerce.

The first big case against a private retailer came in 2006 when the National Federation of the Blind sued Target Corp., claiming that its website could not be navigated by people with visual impairments. Two years later, Target settled the case for \$6 million.

Since that time, lawsuits have proliferated. Part of the problem is that the Department of Justice has not issued rules on what it considers an accessible platform. On the other hand, it has joined lawsuits filed by groups challenging the accessibility of websites and other forms of digital communication.

In Bradley's mind, it is less expensive to have a website audited and fixed than to spend time challenging a lawsuit.

"For the cost of an executive golf outing, Target could have had something workable and could have been one of the first," Bradley said.

The challenge for Web designers is meeting national and international standards for Web development, Bradley said. Many designers are not familiar with standards, she said.

Given that many websites are designed from basic templates that are formatted from style sheets that control the look of thousands of pages of that could make up a web site, the problems could be in the few

pages of the basic templates for the larger sites.

Bradley has experts on call to search the code and recommend fixes. As for her role in the company, she is marketing what is now a multiple-award-winning business, answering the phone, signing contracts and distributing work.

She has an antique hotel desk ringer that she keeps in her home office. Every time she secures a contract, she dings the ringer. It has seen a lot of activity.