

# SUPPLYING THE 9 to 5

*Jennifer Smith joined the family office-supply business, sent it skyrocketing—and then launched a successful firm of her own*

**JENNIFER SMITH, FOUNDER, CEO,** and president of Innovative Office Solutions (IOS), has long harbored entrepreneurial ambitions. “After working at IBM, my father started Town and Country, his own office-supplies company,” she says. “I grew up with his entrepreneurial influence.”

Smith enjoyed helping her dad around his store. It’s no surprise, then, that after her father sold the business, Smith bought it back—and quickly grew the firm’s annual revenues from \$1 million to \$12 million. She ran Town and Country from 1994 to 1997, then sold it to a larger retail chain.

Smith’s entrepreneurial days were just beginning. In 2001, she founded IOS, a full-service dealer of, among other things, office goods, office furniture, and maintenance supplies.

“Our whole underlying mission and vision is [based on the idea] that relationships matter,” Smith says. She has worked hard to establish her firm’s commitment to building, strengthening, and championing positive and trusting relationships with vendors, customers, and employees alike—and her dedication has paid



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## IOS | *Core Services*

**SERVICE:** Office-supplies sales

**WHY IT'S COOL:** IOS is a distributor of office supplies and office-maintenance supplies. One of its particularly noteworthy products is the Ionator cleaner.

**The Ionator**, which resembles a bottle of window cleaner, infuses water with a low-level electrical charge to ensure that it kills bacteria where the water is sprayed. The cleaner uses no chemicals, and comes with a charger to maintain the ionic charge.

**SERVICE:** Managed print services

**WHY IT'S COOL:** To prevent paper waste, the company installs free software that monitors customers' paper-printing patterns. If printing is high, IOS may suggest solutions, such as storing paperwork in e-document formats to minimize the need for printing.

**SERVICE:** Purchase advising

**WHY IT'S COOL:** In partnership with wholesale vendors, IOS advises its customers on how to consolidate the purchasing of office products to save transportation costs and to use more green office products. For example, by buying coffee, stir sticks, paper plates, toilet paper, and cleaning supplies from one location rather than from a variety of suppliers, firms can reduce the amount of trucks that transport the products, and save money with bulk purchasing.

off in the form of awards. Among other honors, IOS has, for the past three years, made *Inc.* magazine's Inc. 5000 list—which ranks the 5,000 fastest-growing companies in America.

Another key aspect of Smith's business philosophy? If a customer has a problem, she empowers employees to make on-the-spot decisions about how to best resolve the issue. That way, customers get answers and satisfaction immediately, without stewing over a delay. “Nine times out of ten, the employee makes the same decision as a senior manager would have in the same circumstance,” Smith says. “We talk about the decisions after the fact, and learn from the outcome.”

Employees seem to thrive under Smith's leadership. Twenty-two IOS employees had previously worked for Smith at Town and Country. Of those 22 employees, 17 still are still on staff at IOS.

“We treat our people and our vendors with respect. It's part of our brand and our culture,” Smith says. “The integrity of the company is built around our reputation.”

The company is a certified Women's Business Enterprise (WBE), and it has won contracts to provide office supplies to the state of Minnesota and major sports teams, including the Minnesota Vikings football team, Minnesota Wild hockey club, Twins baseball team, and Saints minor-league baseball team. The firm gives back to the community by supporting the Vikings' Children's Fund, among other charities, and encourages employees to participate in activities at a local shelter for battered women and their children.

“It is so much fun to be in business,” Smith says. “The people here are wonderful, and we try to make it fun to come into work every day.”

—SANDRA GUY

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