

# Propelled by Professionalism

Rensselaer County Regional Chamber of Commerce

President

Linda Hillman



“I was anxious to use my sales and marketing experience to help the Chamber and Rensselaer County grow even stronger.”

## Success Magazine: Linda, what does success mean to you?

Linda Hillman: When I am able to achieve a goal that I have set for myself—whether it's a personal or professional goal—I feel that I have been successful. The goals I set are not always long-term ones with large implications, but sometimes are just simple milestones that I want to achieve. Reaching for a goal and getting there is very rewarding.

**SM:** You graduated from the University at Albany. What was your field of study?

LH: I majored in English, which I thought would give me a good foundation for whatever I pursued.

**SM:** Why did you decide to stay in the Capital Region?

LH: I moved to the Capital Region many years ago from Syracuse, where I grew up. I have always loved the area because it has so much to offer in terms of business opportunities, arts and entertainment venues, and quality of life. And, honestly, the weather here is much nicer than it is in Syracuse.

**SM:** You have been the President of the Rensselaer Chamber since 2001. What did you do prior to this?

LH: Just prior to joining the Chamber, I was the Vice President of Sales, Marketing, and Public Relations at Empire Corporate Federal Credit Union. Before that, I was the Vice President of Membership at the Albany-Colonie Regional Chamber of Commerce for nine years.

**SM:** How did your prior work experience prepare you for success as President of the Chamber?

LH: I started my career in sales by selling ads for the Business Review, where I was a top performing sales person. That job taught me about marketing, PR and branding, and improved my sales skills. I believe that no matter what job you are in, it's still about selling something. Being able to sell a product, a service, or even an idea is the foundation of successful business growth.

**SM:** Why did you decide to move into this position?

LH: It was apparent to me that this was a great opportunity because I knew all that Rensselaer County has to offer to this region. I was anxious to use my sales and marketing experience to help the Chamber and Rensselaer County grow even stronger.

**SM:** What were your goals at the time?

LH: When I started at the Chamber, we conducted market research to better learn what the members wanted. What they wanted most was quality well organized programs. They were looking for more opportunities to meet other members. Many also said they wanted us to offer a new leadership program.

Our goals were to offer professional programming and service and get our members connected and involved in the Chamber, all of which would assist with our retention efforts. We also had a pressing goal of moving our office to a more professional space. Ultimately, we wanted to put a more professional spin on all aspects of the Chamber. Still today, that professionalism drives everything we do. We knew we had made great progress on those goals when, in 2006, we were named by the American Chamber of Commerce Executives as “one of the top three chambers in the nation.”

**SM:** To what do you attribute this honor?

LH: Being recognized on a national level is truly an honor and it really is a tribute to the excellent work of our staff and the dedicated volunteers who generously give their time and talent to the Chamber.

**SM:** How have your goals changed over the past seven years?

LH: This year we launched a new economic development department and created the Economic Development Partnership together with the county and several corporate partners. Again, this was based on what our members have told us they wanted and needed to succeed. Our strategic plan dictates our programs and we have completed two strategic plans in my time with the Chamber. In 2009 our Board will begin developing the next three-year plan.

**SM:** What do your responsibilities include?

LH: I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of the Chamber and am responsible for developing programs and working with the Board of Directors, Executive Committee, and community businesses and organizations.

**SM:** How many staff members do you currently have?

LH: We have a dedicated staff of one part-time and seven full-time and employees.

**SM:** Under your leadership, the Chamber has increased its budget revenue by 70%, member retention rate by 5% and total membership by 16%. How have you been able to make this possible?

LH: We have the support of an incredible board of directors who provide us with insightful direction and allow us to take intelligent risks when appropriate. And, we have a wonderful and hardworking staff, many of whom have been with the Chamber for a long time. The dedication of our board members and our staff to the mission of the Chamber is what enables us to enjoy success.

**SM:** How many members does the Chamber currently have?

LH: Currently, the Chamber serves 1,225 regional businesses, representing approximately 47,000 individuals.

**SM:** You spend a great deal of time volunteering and sitting on the board of a number of organizations. Why is this important to you?

LH: I think it's very important to give back to the community in which you live. Professionally, I have gained tremendously from the community and so, personally, I feel it's important to help others succeed, whether it's through a professional organization or, on a more basic level, by giving support to a human services organization.

**SM:** With all of your responsibilities and affiliations you must have a very demanding schedule. How are you able to achieve balance in your life?

LH: Everyone has challenges with balance and sometimes I am better at making it work than other times. Balance isn't about hours in a day; it's about balancing your life. Family, friends, travel, exercise, gardening, and reading are important to me and I do find ways to fit them all into my life. Planning and time management are key to balance. As a cancer survivor, it's really important to me to live a healthy lifestyle. So three times a week, I get up at about 5:00 or 5:15 a.m. to exercise. That is my time alone with my iPod.

**SM:** You recently hosted the second annual “Good News” Breakfast. What is the aim of this event?

LH: The concept of “Good News Rensselaer County” came from focus groups the Chamber hosted with Rensselaer County Executive Kathy Jimino. The business professionals suggested a forum to highlight lo-

cal success stories on an annual basis and, with the county, our staff developed the successful event, which is now heading into its third year.

**SM:** What organizations were recognized?

LH: For the 2008 “Good News” event we recognized a diverse group of businesses: CornerStone Telephone Company, Gettysburg Flag Works, Hollywood Drive-In Theatre, Polsinello Fuels, and X-Ray Optical Systems (XOS).

**SM:** How is the Chamber funded?

LH: The Chamber is a private, non-profit business association funded by membership dues, program sponsorships, and member attendance at events.

**SM:** What is the best way for someone to get involved? Do you need volunteers?

LH: There are numerous opportunities to get involved and we like to match the person's area of interest to the appropriate committee or program. Volunteers can contact the Chamber office and we'll put them in touch with the appropriate staff person.

**SM:** How do you join the Chamber?

LH: The easiest way to join the Chamber is to contact our Membership Manager, Christopher Kyer, directly at 518.274.7020 ext. 17 and he'll set up a convenient time to meet and review the benefits of Chamber membership.

**SM:** What are the benefits of being a member?

LH: We offer an extensive array of member benefits including quality networking opportunities, health insurance, educational training, leadership development, discounts on a variety of products and services, energy savings, business referrals, and much more. We believe each business has different needs, so we highlight the programs and services most beneficial to that specific business.

**SM:** What do you hope for the future of Rensselaer County Regional Chamber of Commerce?

LH: I hope we continue to be an important resource for our members and for businesses considering locating in Rensselaer County. We are always asking how we can better assist them and evaluating new products and services to offer. Our goal is to support our members so they grow and remain successful in their businesses. It is not about being huge; it is about offering our members what they need to prosper.

