

Real Living makes top 50 women-led business list Daily Reporter

The first-ever ranking of the fastest-growing women-led companies in North America was released last week and Columbus-based Real Living Inc. placed No. 45 on the top 50 list.

Real Living was the only real estate company to make this year's top 50, released by *Entrepreneur* magazine in partnership with the Women Presidents' Organization.

"I'm thrilled Real Living was recognized as one of the fastest-growing women-led companies, and I'm truly honored to be featured with all of the other incredibly successful women entrepreneurs on the list," said Kaira Sturdivant Rouda, president of Real Living.

Entrepreneur magazine and the WPO, a nonprofit peer advisory organization for women presidents and CEOs, solicited applications from women-led businesses in North America and considered those that met the following criteria: privately held; 2002 sales of \$50,000 or more; and 2006 sales of at least \$1 million.

"Women-owned businesses have been growing in number at twice the rate of all firms for some time, yet their successes still largely go under the radar," said Rieva Lesnosky, senior vice president and editorial director at *Entrepreneur*. "Our ranking, recognizing the accomplishments of these remarkable entrepreneurial women, should inspire millions of other existing and aspiring women business owners to pursue their goals."

Rouda has been with Real Living since day one, having created the brand in 2001 and launching it the following year.

"And from the beginning I set out to create a new brand—one that spoke to an audience no one else was addressing in our industry: women," said Rouda. "So many call women a niche market, when in fact they make up 85 percent of all purchasing decisions and control 91 percent of home purchasing decisions. They are certainly not a niche. I built the Real Living brand with women as the focus, and the power of the Internet helped propel us along."

The strategy appears to have paid off.

Once just an Ohio-based company, Real Living now has offices in 20 states. In 2006, the company totaled \$4 million in sales, up from \$200,000 in 2002.

"Back in 2001, I was a marketing consultant, working on the overall branding and positioning of Real Living, and then working to move HER Realtors, our founding company, and the two other companies we joined together in Cleveland and Cincinnati, under the Real Living name, culture and philosophy," she said. "When I was named president earlier this year, it was really a title finally following what I'd been doing all along."

As company president, Rouda is responsible for the overall strategy and alignment of Real Living's agent and customer care centers; marketing, advertising and special events; professional development and training; franchise sales and services; Web services and information technology infrastructure.

"I'm not big into titles, but many folks are, so it has helped with more industry credibility," she said. "I also think titles and pushing for them help women pave the way for those below them to move up. And I hope everyone associated with Real Living is proud to have me represent them—as proud as I am of how far we've come and the type of company we are creating."

After graduating magna cum laude from Vanderbilt University, Rouda, 44, began her professional career in journalism, then moved into public relations and marketing. So what led Rouda to pursue a career in marketing?

"Watching Darrin Stephens on *Bewitched* started it all," she said. "Seriously, my dad was a marketing professor at Ohio State in the MBA program so I grew up with my marketing MBA. I love talking to consumers and building relationships with them. I enjoy building brands that really connect with people."

Rouda also is passionate about women business owners, having recently completed a book with her entrepreneurial insights and branding expertise, *Real You Incorporated: 8 Essentials for Women Entrepreneurs*, due out in February.

"The book covers many of my 25-plus years of experiences in marketing and branding, and teaches women how to put their personal brand in their business brand," she said.

Prior to joining Real Living, Rouda was vice president of marketing for Stanely Steemer International, where she led the company's national marketing; created its brand positioning; coordinated more than 20 media co-ops, spending more than \$15 million annually in media; and oversaw all details of its annual sales convention.

When it comes to pinning down names of people who have had the biggest impact on her career, Rouda said she has too many mentors to name.

"Let's just say you learn as much from the positive players as you do from the negative ones," she said. "You just send holiday cards to positive role models."

In the immediate future, Rouda said Real Living plans to grow by franchising across the United States.

"I want Real Living to be the top national real estate franchisor in the nation," she said. "We're currently in 20 states, and I like to say we're aiming for world domination."

Her advice to others hoping to start their own marketing careers is to "put your real you in your business. People know if you're faking it. Build your personal brand first, and be true to yourself."

Insights from the other women leaders at the helm of this year's top 50 companies can be found in the November issue of *Entrepreneur*. All 50 companies will be honored at a special event Dec. 3 with the WPO in New York City.