

Portal, Inc. looks to refine its image

Written by MARK JAEGER
Wednesday, 20 July 2011 15:33

Subtle name change better reflects nonprofit agency's role in community

Officials at Portal Industries have long conceded that the name of the Grafton-based nonprofit agency that serves adults with developmental disabilities has been misleading.



PORTAL, INC. CLIENT Anna Couwenhoven of Port Washington (clockwise from top) works, and frequently socializes with customers, at Noodles & Company in Grafton. Holly Kultgen of Fredonia works part-time at Here We Grow Care Center in Saukville. Kultgen has worked for several years at the center, keep the play area neat and helps serve lunch. She also teaches youngsters sign language. Alex Kirst of Port Washington works in the business office at Concordia University Wisconsin in Mequon. *Photos provided by Portal, Inc.*

To correct the problem of perception, the rehabilitation agency has made the subtle move to rebrand itself Portal, Inc.

The new name got major play Saturday, July 16, during Port Washington's Fish Day 8K run/walk. That race is the agency's largest fund-raising event.

Portal, Inc. looks to refine its image

Written by MARK JAEGER

Wednesday, 20 July 2011 15:33

Portal, Inc. was touted on all race materials, including the T-shirts given to participants.

The agency's new Web site, developed by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Entech program, unabashedly proclaims the name change as "ability reDefined."

"There has been a problem of image, especially outside the community. We never really were an industry, because we don't produce things," said Dale Mahal, the agency's director of communications.

Instead, the program has generated income by accepting contracts with private companies to assemble and package products brought to the workshop on Cedar Creek Road. Those work orders provide productive jobs to individuals from throughout Ozaukee County who have developmental disabilities.

The emphasis on offering in-house jobs is changing, too, according to Mahal.

"For many years, essentially since we started in 1965, our emphasis was seen as being a sheltered workshop. However, the goal has always been to get clients off our work floor and into jobs in the community," he said.

Eliminating the "Industries" from its name, Mahal said, better reflects the agency's position that it is not intended to be a place to shelter people with disabilities away from the outside world of work.

"Whenever possible, the desire is to try to help clients find employment. This allows them to make a real wage, and shows the public that people with developmental disabilities are not lepers but productive members of society," Mahal said.

According to the agency, the program's goal is to maximize the employment skills of clients, enhancing their self-esteem and reducing their reliance on government benefits.

"Any time you are in a social setting, one of the first questions people you meet ask is 'What do you do?' It means a lot to our people to be able to say, 'I work at a restaurant' or 'I have a job at an office,' instead of saying 'I work at Portal,'" Mahal said.

Because it specializes in finding jobs for people with disabilities, Portal is able to extend its exemption from the minimum-wage requirement, but that incentive hasn't resulted in a flood of job offers to client workers in this economy.

"When our employment consultants approach employers, they have often been told they just are not hiring. The fact is a lot of companies in this economy are throttling back on their workforce. They would rather pass even menial jobs on to their own employees rather than laying them off," Mahal said.

When that response is given, he said the Portal staff stresses that client workers can do many

Portal, Inc. looks to refine its image

Written by MARK JAEGER

Wednesday, 20 July 2011 15:33

tasks are far less cost than shifting the work to higher-paid employees.

Even the contracts the agency gets for in-house assembly and packaging work are considered a “prevocational service,” helping clients develop work skills needed by the private sector. Mahal said sustaining an environment where light assembly contract work is handled efficiently can be a challenge.

“Our clients can usually do the tasks needed by employers very well, but often not as fast. That creates a Catch 22 for us because once a client proves very capable at a certain task, they are often hired away,” he said.

Mahal said although the subtlety of the agency’s name change may be lost on a large segment of the public, the Portal staff is taking every opportunity to use the new moniker.

“It does take some getting used to. I’ve even had to correct our executive director on a number of occasions,” he said.

Mahal said he hopes the community gets lots of practice using the agency’s new name by taking part in EMC Insurance Company’s 100 Ways of Giving campaign.

Program supporters can log onto www.CountonEMC.com/give/index.asp and vote daily for Portal, Inc.

The top four vote-getters through Oct. 8 will each receive \$25,000 grants.

The agency has already won a \$1,000 grant to celebrate the Brookfield insurance company’s 100th anniversary.