

Gerke takes management consulting worldwide

The firm's innovative approach has benefited clients from Procter & Gamble to Columbia's Chamber of Commerce.

By B.C. JONES Special to the Tribune

Published Saturday, April 20, 2002

As his firm enters its second quarter century, business consultant Gene Gerke finds that he's spending most of his time on the road.

Much of his business, which involves evaluating companies' operations and helping them become more efficient, is done outside Mid-Missouri. Gerke & Associates, 2511 Old 63 S., has logged time in Washington, D.C., and every U.S. state except Alaska, along with Europe, Asia and South America.



Ed Pfueller photo

Last year, Gerke spent 65 days on the road - an unusually low total for two reasons: Gerke had major back surgery, and the nation's economy went into shock after Sept. 11.

Gene Gerke is president of Gerke & Associates, a Columbia-based management consulting firm with clients worldwide.

"Nobody wanted to do anything for a while after that," he said.

Nonetheless, Gerke & Associates has enjoyed steadily increasing revenues for several consecutive years. Its clients have included Fortune 500 companies such as Panasonic, Quaker Oats, Farmland Industries, Procter & Gamble and Shell Oil.

While big clients keep him on the move, Gerke has done plenty of work for smaller organizations in Columbia. For example, his firm helped the Columbia Housing Authority grapple with organizational growing pains as its staff swelled to 60 employees.

Housing authority Executive Director Doris Chiles found a team-building exercise and counseling to be very helpful. "We have a better team effort now," she said.

David Franta, executive director of Columbia Area United Way, has worked with Gerke both as a board member and as a paid consultant. A strategic plan for the organization developed by Gerke's firm has just been approved by its board. "Gene has an excellent knowledge of human resources, information technology and strategic planning," Franta said, adding that Gerke also is caring and community-minded. "He's been a great help over a period of years."



Gerke believes that each business or organization has a different philosophy and culture, and he uses that approach to his advantage - and his clients'. "Large consulting firms have set approaches they impose on clients," he said. "We look at the client's entire operation and tailor our recommendations accordingly. We want to exceed client expectations and demonstrate our core values of honesty and preparation."

To further its mission of "creating client success," Gerke & Associates concentrates on strategic planning and organizational change, analysis and improvement of business operations, and information-technology consulting.

The consulting company also is a software developer. Gerke & Associates has come up with several software packages to help evaluate companies within their respective industries.

A package known as BizBench, for example, allows companies in some 600 different industries to compare their financial performance with similar-size firms in the same industry. Banks, consultants and other clients in 34 states are using BizBench to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of individual businesses.



Ed Pfueller photo

Consultant Steven Phillips takes a conference call with a client from his office at Gerke & Associates in Columbia. The consulting firm has a staff of eight.

A Geographic Information Systems package that Gerke offers helps businesses with site selection, redrawing various kinds of districts, delivery, dispatching and real estate matters.

CstoreXChange, another software package, helps convenience stores measure performance through comparison with other convenience stores, while NAXML provides electronic exchange of business documents between trading partners.

Gerke calls the software, which is still a small part of his client services, "smart information tools."

In 1984, Gerke formed a network of independent consultants called Group 7 LLC to pool information that can help organizations prepare for the future. The idea is to provide quicker and cheaper advice to clients by enabling the participating consultants to avoid starting from scratch on every problem they confront.

The strategies have paid off. One client saw absenteeism fall by 23 percent and tardiness by 85 percent by implementing a "quality-of-work" program Gerke recommended. And a Gerke-assisted "peer group" process produced a plan that saved a distributor \$100,000.

The "peer-group" methodology also helped the Columbia Chamber of Commerce four years ago.

The chamber retained Gerke to facilitate a "peer review" of chamber activities by chamber executives from other areas, then prepare a report. This process led the chamber to coordinate its strategic plan and business plan more logically, review its staff salary structure to assess its competitiveness, and re-examine its role in community issues.

President Don Laird said the Columbia chamber had also worked with Gerke & Associates on a program to attract retirees to Columbia and other projects. "They're a very good, professional organization," he said. "They're easy to work with and a big plus for the community."

Gerke credits his staff - an office manager, a research associate and six consultants - for much of his success.

Research associate Kimberly Bechtel, who graduated magna cum laude from Truman State University, spent a year in China teaching and improving her Mandarin Chinese. Vice President David Benish got his bachelor's and master's degrees in industrial engineering from Arizona State University, while consultant Steven Phillips holds bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering management along with a master's degree in accountancy from Missouri state universities.

Gerke & Associates places the achievements and hobbies of all staff members on its Web page, www.gerke.com. The group takes annual road trips to such destinations as the Lake of the Ozarks, Kansas City and St. Louis. This year they might make a group trip by train from Jefferson City to Hermann.

A consulting firm "depends upon the energy of its employees," Gerke said. True to his approach of tailoring consulting to individual clients, Gerke said that "a good consultant must be comfortable with uncertainties and always be flexible."

In 2001, Gerke published an article that shows the sort of challenges consultants face. His topic was the National Association of Convenience Stores' efforts to standardize technology for the industry's complex operations. The report noted that individual convenience stores, which might be open every hour of a calendar year, sell packaged goods, motor fuels and such age-restricted products as cigarettes, liquor and lottery tickets. Some also serve as banks and operate a food service.

Besides compliance with numerous governmental regulations and controlling inventory, stores require multiple card readers to deal with various payment forms: cash, checks, bank credit cards, oil company credit cards, radio-frequency identification payments, fleet cards, prepaid cards, debit cards and government electronic benefits transfer payments.

Despite the challenges, Gerke noted in his report, the industry has found technology that could save retailers an estimated \$1 billion annually.

●
Although he currently consults for a wide range of large corporations and smaller businesses, Gerke's early training suggested that he would become an agribusiness specialist. While earning his bachelor's degree in agricultural economics from the

University of Missouri-Columbia in 1972, he doubled as a part-time statistician with the Department of Agriculture.

As a research assistant at Purdue University, where he eventually earned a master's degree in agricultural economics, Gerke developed a number of management and computer skills that proved useful when he served as manager for economic analysis for the Food Marketing Institute from 1974 to 1977.

As he gained business experience, Gerke found that he had the ability to grasp a corporation's total operations and deal with its management issues. When his growing confidence was reciprocated by business leaders, Gerke founded his Columbia firm and has become a major player in community service.

Besides membership in three professional organizations, Gerke has filled leadership posts in the Columbia Area United Way, Columbia Kiwanis Club, Columbia Chamber of Commerce and the Missouri FarmHouse Foundation. For the past three years, he has been president of the Missouri Innovation Center, a business incubator on Sinclair Road.

Juggling his business and civic commitments requires careful planning, yet Gerke finds time for golf, reading - his recent reading list includes John Grisham novels and Harry Potter adventures - and exercise. A former triathlete, he takes his running shoes on business trips and runs around cities to keep in shape.

Gerke also draws energy from his varied consulting work. "This business always keeps you sharp and learning," he said. "Nothing's routine, and the new challenges make it exciting."

Copyright © 2002 The Columbia Daily Tribune. All Rights Reserved.

COLUMBIA DAILY
TRIBUNE