



Debra Johnson's Chandler-based business, Eco-Edge LLC, boosts fuel efficiency in fleet vehicles.

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# Blue sky is her business

Entrepreneur relishes giving asthmatic daughter better air to breathe

BY PATRICK O'GRADY | pogrady@bizjournals.com

Entrepreneurship is built into Debra Johnson's family. As a child, she watched her father start and run four different businesses in Herman, Mo., ranging from magic supplies to plastics. It gave her a start in the business world.

"The business talk happened at home, and I got to work in the business," says Johnson, who at 17 took over as sales manager for her father's plastics company.

Family is an important connection for her. It led her into business for herself as president of Eco-Edge LLC, a Chandler-based company geared toward boosting fuel efficiency in fleet vehicles.

Johnson didn't set out to be green. She started out in the business world as an accountant, and for years she plied her trade helping other companies.

That background helped when she jumped into the sustainability field six years ago, long before it became the hip thing to do.

Her analytical skills helped build the business. People didn't always believe the devices her company delivered could increase fuel mileage, so she arranged for outside testing to prove it.

"It came naturally to me because of my auditor background," she says. "People said, 'Show me,' and I said, 'OK, but it has to be independent.'"

The other driver of her business was her 13-year-old daughter, Lauren, who has asthma. While green may not have been cool, giving her daughter better air to breathe by taking pollutants out of it was a good goal, Johnson says.

Entrepreneurship also lets her spend more time with her family and do a better job at work, she says.

"The nice thing about being an entrepreneur is, as someone told me, you get to pick the 12 hours a day you work," she says.

David Beauchamp, a partner at the Phoenix law office of Bryan Cave LLP, has known Johnson since the two of them were in Valley Leadership together about 15 years ago. He says she tries to bring something to the table for everyone.

"She has a tremendous analytical mind to determine

how something can work so everyone can win," he says.

Beauchamp says he's always been impressed with Johnson's devotion to business and family, and her ability to be successful at both.

"It's just wonderful to see someone that successful in the business world be the same way at home with her family," he says.

Johnson's focus and drive also contribute to that success, and finding a niche where she can make a difference in her community has fueled the growth of Eco-Edge, says Rena Huber, director of Arizona Public Service Co.'s Academy for the Advancement of Small, Minority and Women-Owned Enterprises.

"I think she is great at researching and open to possibilities," Huber says.

Johnson credits a lot of who she is now with how she grew up in rural Missouri. The youngest of four, she got to do a bit more traveling than her siblings — for example, when her parents took her to China. She says experiences like those opened her eyes to what was possible.

"I think it broadens your horizon and makes you realize other cultures have so much to offer," Johnson says. "It makes you so less egocentric."

Now it's about doing business and making the sky a little bluer in the Valley — and learning that sometimes, intuition beats scientific analysis.

"I've learned to trust my gut more," she says. "I used to worry whether I was making good decisions or bad decisions. I learned that if I went against what my gut said, it usually ended up being wrong."



## PROFILE: DEBRA JOHNSON

**TITLE:** President  
**COMPANY:** Eco-Edge LLC  
**E-MAIL:** djohnson@ecoedgeco.com  
**AGE:** 47  
**SPOUSE:** Paul Johnson (the lawyer, not the former mayor)  
**RESIDENCE:** Ahwatukee  
**CHILDREN:** Ryan, 16; Lauren, 13; and Rookie, a goldendoodle dog  
**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree in accounting, summa cum laude, Arizona State University  
**ASSOCIATIONS:** Valley Leadership, AAAME Class 9, Arizona Businesses Advancing Sustainability, Valley Forward, Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, Arizona Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Associated General Contractors, Arizona Rock Products Association  
**AWARDS:** Make Mine a Million \$ Business National Award, Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce Impact Award Finalist

## Q & A

**DEFINE SUCCESS:** "Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem 'What Is Success' is my definition. Two key lines from that are: 'To leave the world a bit better' and 'To know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.' That about sums it up!"

**MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU LOOK FOR IN A JOB:** "That it can be done with integrity."

**IF YOU COULD MEMORIZE ONE BOOK COVER TO COVER, WHAT WOULD IT BE:** "The Alchemist," by Paulo Coelho."

**GAMBLER OR MEASURED RISK TAKER:** "Without a doubt, I am a measured risk taker. I lost all \$3 I gambled in Vegas the first time I went, but when it came to 'betting it on green' six years ago, I truly believed it was worth the risk. Watching my entrepreneurial father constantly take huge risks (that drove my mother crazy!), because he knew he had a measure of control and what the potential outcome was, taught me that sometimes you need to take that leap of faith."

**DO YOU THINK ARIZONA WILL BE A BETTER OR WORSE PLACE 25 YEARS FROM NOW:** "I truly believe Arizona has the ability to be a better place in 25 years. In the past five years, I have seen a shift in how our population and our leaders are looking at growth, the environment, infrastructure, education and all the things that represent quality of life to Arizonans. I am confident that sustainability is not a passing fad, but a change in the way we manage our communities. Consequently, I believe the overall prognosis for Arizona in 25 years is much better today than when I started my business six years ago."

**WHO OR WHAT HAS HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE ON WHERE YOU ARE TODAY:** "My father. He set a very high standard for us as children and was an amazing role model. I learned so much from him about dealing with people, running a business and living life with integrity. He planted the seed of entrepreneurship in me and set me on the path to get there."

**YOUR GREATEST EXTRAVAGANCE:** "Going out for a really good dinner with my husband."