

Government contracting firm 8-koi expands into PPE market with face masks, Nitrile gloves, range of other supplies; sells to public; working with Delta Air Lines

By Ken Datzman

Quickly, the face mask has become one of the most sought-after commodities worldwide.

And all of a sudden, a longtime Melbourne-based government contracting firm has discovered a new market — personal protective equipment.

“At the beginning of the year, the selling of personal protective equipment was not on our radar at all. This is a business we never thought we would be in, but today we are fully entrenched in that effort and offer a portfolio of PPE products to businesses, to government agencies, and to the public,” said businesswoman Inga Young, president and CEO of Melbourne-based 8-koi.

As a small business, 8-koi, which also owns Cape Design Engineering Co. on Merritt Island, has been able to pivot and tap a market where demand is projected to remain strong, years into the future.

“Before the coronavirus pandemic, three-ply masks probably sold for a quarter. Now they’re running roughly a dollar because of demand,” she said.

The global disposable face-mask market size exceeded \$74 billion in the first quarter of 2020, according to Grandview Research. It is expected to grow at a compound annual rate of 53 percent now through 2027. The unprecedented spread of the coronavirus worldwide, most notably in Europe and North America, is driving the demand for face masks.

Young’s company has rolled out a full line of medical supplies, including three-ply face masks, KN95 face masks, custom logo masks, infrared thermometers, Tyvek coverall protective suits, shoe covers, surface disinfectant, Environcleanse, and Nitrile gloves.

Her company’s Nitrile gloves are water-proof, grease-proof, and oil-proof, and resistant to a range of chemicals and substances. These types of gloves are commonly used in the medical industry because of their high puncture resistance.

In response to the shortage of N95-rated masks, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration have listed KN95 masks as an alternative.

The coronavirus spreads mainly from person-to-person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected individual coughs, sneezes, or talks, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby, or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Studies and evidence on infection control report that these droplets usually travel around six feet. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends wearing cloth face coverings in public settings.

All of the 8-koi products are available in bulk and are also sold in small units. Their disposable masks are sold to the public.

Area dentists, pharmacists, health-care organizations, individuals, and other parties have been purchasing masks and personal protective equipment from 8-koi. They now have a local, trusted supplier.

Call (321) 799-2970 or email healthcare@8-koi.com for pricing on the various products. “We are not doing internet sales,” she said. “We are serving the local community. And we’re bringing in products in high volume. When you sell local, there is no shipping cost.”

Young’s company operates four divisions: construction, health care, design engineering, and technical services.



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Entrepreneur Inga Young is the founder of 12-year-old 8-koi, a fast-growing government contracting firm headquartered in Melbourne. Her 8(a) certified economically disadvantaged woman-owned small business has tapped the personal protective equipment market created by the coronavirus pandemic and now offers a full portfolio of products including KN95 masks. Young is a University of Florida accounting graduate.

The firm specializes in providing services in these sectors to government agencies in multiple states, including Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, home to the Center for the Intrepid, a rehabilitation facility staffed to treat wounded warriors, mainly those who served in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Her firm has about 24 employees working at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., including one “non-essential” clerical staffer who works in the hospital.

Early on, when the coronavirus started spreading, the clerical worker requested a three-ply face mask to wear for protection on her job. There were none available.

“She was concerned she might get the virus, and asked to work from home,” said Young, who grew up in an entrepreneurial family.

“We were determined to get PPE supplies for our

employees there. And we did. We started making calls inquiring about the cost of having masks made. That’s how we originally got into the PPE market.”

Soon, 8-koi received a call from the Indian Health Service, which is an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Indian Health Service is responsible for providing federal health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

“Indian Health Service called us and said they were searching for three-ply face masks,” said Young. “We were able to help them. We were able to source pallets of three-ply masks for Indian Health Service. We delivered around 500,000 three-ply masks on pallets to various Indian Health Service locations.”

Meanwhile, Young said 8-koi was gearing up to supply

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masks to its employees at Patrick Air Force Base who work in the medical treatment facility.

8-koi is now working with Delta Air Lines helping the Atlanta-based company design a face mask that is made with Oeko Tex, “a fabric that is tested for skin sensitively and long-term wear,” she said.

Oeko Tex fabric has been certified free from hazardous chemicals and is therefore deemed safe. The sorts of chemicals that the fabric is tested for include banned azo dyes, formaldehyde, cadmium, and nickel.

Delta Air Lines is redesigning its uniforms after employees complained about allergic reactions to the purple garments. In late November, the company simplified the process that allows employees to wear black-and-white attire as an alternative.

The purple uniforms were manufactured by a Wisconsin company. In January, Delta Air Lines said it will launch a completely new uniform program for all flight attendants and “above-wing” airport customer-service agents. Employee feedback guided this decision, according to Delta Air Lines, and their input will continue to inform the uniform-development process.

“We sent Delta our first prototype face mask we designed for them,” said Young. “Then they asked if we could make the masks in the new black-and-white color combination with the Oeko Tex fabric. So we have those samples on the way to them as well.”

Recently, 8-koi received a shipment of three-ply face masks and sent 500 to their workers at the Naval Hospital in Jacksonville. “They are doing construction work at the hospital. The contracting officer called and told me other subcontractors were also having challenges getting masks, so we helped them, too,” said Young, who is a University of

Florida accounting graduate.

Her business is also supplying masks to Indian Health Service in Hawaii. “Our government PPE business has been good.”

Young said she is looking to sell personal protection equipment products to sports teams, including locally and to the professional ranks, such as Major League baseball. She is beginning to contact some Florida teams. “It would be great to get into the sports market, providing custom logo masks for teams. We hope we can do that.”

Young, of Asian heritage, founded 8-koi on Aug. 8, 2008, “which was the opening day of the 2008 Summer Olympics, commonly known as ‘Beijing 2008.’ The number 8 in the Asian culture is significant. So the name 8-koi symbolizes good luck and prosperity.”

And her company has prospered over the last decade. She started 8-koi in her home and worked alongside three people. Today, the firm employs about 70 people and has an office along Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard in Melbourne, in addition to its Merritt Island location.

8-koi was singled out last year at the “Florida Companies to Watch” event at the David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts in Tampa. 8-koi is an 8(a) certified woman-owned small disadvantaged business.

Five-hundred second-stage companies were nominated and only the top 50 were chosen to be spotlighted for their innovative strategies and processes, high performance, and rapid growth. 8-koi made the list as an honoree.

The event is hosted annually by GrowFL, in association with the Edward Lowe Foundation. Thirty-four percent of employment in the state of Florida is generated by second-stage companies like 8-koi. These second-stage companies

have from six to 150 full-time employees and generate between \$750,000 and \$100 million in annual sales.

Young’s company sets high goals. She said 8-koi’s revenue target three years out is \$100 million. “That’s our ‘BHAG’ goal — a big, hairy audacious goal. We have to set high goals and try to reach them.”

The 8-koi team has completed many projects. For example, it did the complete design and build of the biological science laboratory at NASA’s Space Station Processing Facility at Kennedy Space Center. That was a \$4.7 million project. “The entire building and systems were modeled using BIM software,” said Young.

Building Information Modeling software helps architects, engineers, and construction professionals be more collaborative, automated, and successful working together.

The NASA building was awarded Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Silver certification by the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council.

Young has more than 25 years’ experience in government work. Her resume includes having served as the controller and director of business operations for Confluent RF Systems Corp., which was purchased by Northrop Grumman Corp. in 2005. She also was a financial analyst at Exigent International, which was sold to Harris Corp., now L3Harris, in 2001.

“I had worked for some sizable companies and had in mind that my company would have eight divisions. I like that number 8. We’re not there yet, but we’re growing in all our divisions. The construction division is our biggest revenue provider right now.”

She added, “We had a good year in 2019 and we’re having a good year in 2020. Our PPE business is contributing to our good performance.”



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