



Staff photo by MIEKE ZUIDERWEG

Deborah E. Kruger, chief executive officer of PsychBilling Inc., sits in her office at Gatehouse Road in Amherst.

Creative side drives businesswoman, artist

'Attention to detail' helps Deborah E. Kruger succeed in her multiple endeavors.

By **KENNETH L. ROSS**
Business editor

Deborah E. Kruger blends business with art.

Sometimes it's hard to tell the executive and artist apart because the two seem to serve each other so well.

In fact, she works hard to be able to spend more time in her studio.

Kruger, 53, is chief executive officer of PsychBilling Inc. in Amherst, a business she started in 1981 at her kitchen table.

The company, which provides billing services to mental health providers in the Northeast, is still growing as it enters its second quarter century. Kruger's art is growing, too, as she has just signed an agreement with Translations Gallery in Denver to represent her fiber art.

"Business, especially medical billing, is all about attention to detail and solving problems," she said. "The same goes for art."

PsychBilling, which now employs eight people and will add more this year, has nearly 100 clients, from New York and Connecticut to Western Massachusetts and Boston, to New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island. And she just got a call from a potential client in Maine. Many of them are

individual clinicians such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and licensed nurse specialists.

"They treat broken hearts, not broken arms," Kruger said the other day over coffee.

She said wants to help clients concentrate their time on what they do best.

"My new ad slogan is, 'Sanity is just around the corner.'"

She said only 70 percent of insurance claims submitted by paper are paid after the first submission and only about 40 percent of claims are filed electronically.

And, she notes, most psychologists and psychiatrists don't have business training for the systems and organizations required for successful third-party billing. She said that providers doing their own billing spend on average five hours a week - or 21/2 days a month - on phone calls and paperwork.

Although the majority of her clients are individuals, some of whom have been with the company for more than 20 years, PsychBilling counts Brandeis University and other larger practices among its customers.

"I am trying to attract larger groups," Kruger said. "I just signed up Hartford Psychological Services, which is one of two Hispanic neuropsychological practices in Connecticut."

She also plans to have exhibits at more trade shows, since she's already signed up four clients from the first one she attended.

When PsychBilling looks to add to its staff, it

seeks people who have billing experience.

"Billing has gotten very complicated," Kruger said. "We need to hire people who are seasoned billers."

It has had success in recruiting billing trainees from schools, such as Branford Hall Career Institute's Springfield campus, which has a medical billing program.

"We just don't have the staff to bring somebody up to speed from scratch," she said.

Last year she hired Jen Turner as chief financial officer and chief operating officer to join Phoebe Merriam, who has been with PsychBilling for more than six years and now serves as vice president of operations.

"Phoebe's job also is to service a 'midwife' for our new providers. People come to us with all kinds of messes. Phoebe ushers them in and handles their account for two to four months before turning it over to the more permanent billing manager."

Turner's tasks include human resources.

"I snagged Jen out of the MBA program at the Isenberg School of Management at UMass," Kruger said. "Two of my associates called me and said, 'There's a superstar graduating, and if you're smart you'll snap her up.'"

She said that there's always the temptation to broaden the business to do billing for other fields, but for now she'll stick with mental health practices.

"There's a lot of need for this kind of specialized billing. It's tempting to try to expand, but there's a lot more we can do in this field."

Kruger wins praise from colleagues for both style and substance.

"She is a person who sincerely believes in relationships," said Ira Bryck, director of the Family Business Center at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "She becomes part of a customer's team."

He also praised her style as a manager.

"I have seen first hand, that as a boss, she trusts her employees and allows them to do their job. She allows them to be innovative."

Bryck noted that Kruger serves as a facilitator of women's roundtable sessions sponsored by the Family Business Center.

Heather Miller, marketing director of the UMass University Without Walls, said Kruger has been a colleague since they first met 26 years ago.

At that time Kruger was a designer and Miller was selling ads and handling other business duties at New Roots, a small alternative energy magazine that was published in Greenfield.

"She's an artist with a strong business acumen," Miller said, noting that she taught Kruger how to use an adding machine.

"She's a creative thinker who has built a business model for her field. Her business has grown from a one person operation to being a contributor to the economy of the Pioneer Valley."

Miller said Kruger, who leads workshops at the Rowe Conference Center, is a "phenomenal lecturer" (Kruger will offer her Empowerment for Women in the Arts weekend from Feb. 23 to 25 at the Rowe Center.)

"I've never met a woman quite like her with the creative side and the business acumen," Miller said.

Bryck noted that Kruger takes great pains to know where the boundaries are between her business and her art.

Kruger said she is "solidly" in her studio in the Arts and Industry Building in the Florence section of Northampton one day a week.

"As the company becomes more successful, I hope I can be there two days a week," she said.

"I love what I do, but it's a means to an end. You get to a point in life where you don't want to postpone your joy any longer."