The Catalyst Ranch

September 21, 2009 by Tate Gunnerson

Bored of a long bland hallway, Catalyst Ranch founder and then Quaker Oats marketing executive Eva Niewiadomski found a clever way to subvert the staid corporate culture pervading so many office spaces by transforming the space into a colorful idea area. Using her trademark funky style, Niewiadomski constructed floor to ceiling wall panels covered with a bright Velcro fabric upon which teams could pin their ideas and inspirations. While intended primarily for the marketing folks, all employees were welcome to jot down their ideas. The program was so successful, the company gave Niewiadomski a conference room, which she decorated with 50's era furniture upholstered in fun colors.

"My co-workers loved the Innovation Hallways," says Niewiadomski. "It was a great interactive space and it was a vehicle for showing what was going on competitively and what we had in the way of new products and promotions that we were doing."

Buoyed by her peers' positive feedback and intrigued by the new ideas being generated when people collaborated in a decidedly non-corporate environment, Niewiadomski realized her trademark fifties style would be the perfect aesthetic for a corporate events facility, so she refinanced her house, leased a 9000 square foot loft space in a former herring packing factory in the West Loop and bought as much vintage furniture as she could get her hands on. While the space needed a complete buil out, Niewiadomski saved money by acting as her own general contractor and relying on friends in various trades. She finished the build-out in five weeks, opening in November 2002.

Catalyst Ranch was so successful that Niewiadomski soon expanded, leasing another 6500 upstairs for a total of six conference rooms, which are used for training seminars, strategic planning meetings, trade conferences, association meetings, workshops, consumer market research/focus groups, staff retreats, board meetings, sales meetings and brainstorming sessions.