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And the winner is

Columnist Jon Lansner hands out awards for O.C.'s best and worst in business for 2006.



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Holiday seasons are rich with traditions.

Great food. Good company. Fine gifts. And a litany of year-end awards.

How could I not fulfill my seasonal duties after a year like this?

Twelve wild months that saw high-def hot, and housing not. A time when noteworthy additions to O.C. product lines included breast implants and breakfast burritos.

Without further delay, let's get down to business ...

BY THE R&D LAB

Gizmo of the Year: To VZ Navigator by **Networks in Motion** from Irvine. Imagine your cell phone talking you through a freeway maze or the muddle of some farm town or master-planned community. This upgrade to certain **Verizon** phones, powered by the Global Positioning System or GPS, is a blessing to the direction-challenged or those seeking everything from food to entertainment to medical care near their current location. Verizon's nationwide marketing campaign helped put Networks In Motion on the map.

IN THE CORNER OFFICE

CEO of the Year: To David Pyott, CEO of **Allergan** in Irvine. After making wrinkle wonder Botox a household word, Pyott looks smart after winning a \$3 billion takeover battle for breast-implant maker **Inamed**. Regulators just ended a 14-year ban on sale of silicone implants, opening up another sales opportunity for Allergan's newest business. Allergan's stock's up 15 percent this year after jumping by one-third in '05.

Rookie of the Year: Scott Olivet, CEO at **Oakley**. In his first year at the Foothill Ranch eyewear specialist, this ex- **Nike** exec's energy helped sales jump and the stock price soar as the company put new initiatives such as custom shades, new stores and acquisitions into gear. Meanwhile, tough calls, like ending Oakley's footwear adventure, were made.

Retiree of the Year: To Kevin Moriarty, former CEO of **Del Taco**. The man helped merge two moribund chains, Del Taco and the now defunct **Naugles**, and built one of the more successful brands around these parts. In the cleanup process, he gained full control of Del Taco in the mid-1990s. This summer, Moriarty retired after selling his chain to East Coast investors for a nine-figure sum. Not a bad return for restaurants known for their cheap grub.

Scandal of the Year: Co-winners! One trophy goes to the local companies touched by the ugly stock-option scandal, where corporate insiders either sloppily or intentionally created juicy stock discounts for employees. O.C. outfits in this quagmire include **Broadcom, Ceradyne, Corinthian Colleges, First American, Meade Instruments, Quest Software, Valeant** and **Western Digital**. The other scandal award goes to **Ameriquest**, O.C.'s giant lender to folks with dicey credit. Earlier this year it agreed to pay \$325 million to settle numerous lawsuits alleging that it misled its borrowers.

ON THE FRONT LINES

Hire of the Year: To hockey's **Anaheim Ducks**, for acquiring Chris Pronger. This deal gives the Ducks two of the three best defensemen in pro hockey. So far, it's a formula for success on and off the ice. The Ducks have the best record in the National Hockey League, and ticket and merchandise sales are up from last year.

Fire of the Year: To the creators of "The O.C." TV show. Kill off the lead female babe in a show about a bunch of hottie rich kids from Newport Beach? Oopsies! Without actress Misha Barton playing the often-troubled Marissa – who died in last season's finale – ratings have plunged for the **Fox TV** prime-time soap opera.

Orange County loses the show's free advertising if The O.C. gets axed due to this casting mistake.

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Home of the Year: To the new twin condo towers at Park Place in Irvine. Love them or hate them, these Vancouver-inspired, green-glass structures are pioneers in vertical living in Orange County. The big question, now that the overall housing market's cooled, is how many of the plans for additional condo towers around the county will actually be built.

Food of the Year: Anything to do with breakfast. **Taco Bell** from Irvine experiments with morning fare. As does **Wendy's**. **Carl's Jr.** and Del Taco, two morning-service vets, both add sausage items to the menu. And **McDonald's** adds \$1 selection for the breakfast crowd. Even pancake house **IHOP** has its own twist – a cheeseburger topped with bacon and egg.

ON THE TRENDLINE

Slump of the Year: To the housing industry. Seemingly overnight, homes went from "must have" to "must wait" in 2006. Buyers regained control of the market, and then took a siesta. Through November, total sales of all kinds of O.C. residences were down 28 percent from 2005's pace. Old condos took the brunt, with resales down 34 percent in '06.

Boom of the Year: To flat-screen high-definition TVs. Experts suggest that unit sales of these home-entertainment marvels will have doubled in 2006 from a year ago. Why? Prices are plummeting, thanks to the likes of manufacturer **Vizio** from Costa Mesa. They've staked out a niche at the lower-priced part of the spectrum.

Roller Coaster of the Year: To gasoline prices. If I told you a year ago that gas prices would only be up 15 percent from last December, you might have thought it would be a tame year on the energy scene. It was far from that. Local prices at the pump went from a touch above \$2 at the beginning of '06 to well above three bucks in May – where prices stayed for much of the summer. Autumn brought a chill at the pump, and prices now sit around \$2.50. Who knows what's next.

FROM ACCOUNTING

"Wasn't Born Yesterday" Award: To the city of Anaheim, who politely told the **National Football League** to get lost. The NFL was seeking fat subsidies to get a

football stadium built and bring pro football back to the L.A. region. The city will find it far more profitable to sell its land, next to the Angels' baseball stadium, to commercial developers rather than to NFL interests at fire-sale prices.

Surrender of the Year: To **Diedrich Coffee**, the homegrown chain of java joints. Fighting **Starbucks** for decades proved too tough. So the local baristas sold out, handing their shops over to the Seattle coffee giant for \$ million. The Diedrich name will survive simply as a brand of coffee beans. A bummer for those who enjoy going out for any brew other than Starbucks.

Bulldog Award: To shareholders of **William Lyon Homes**. These persistent investors used lawsuits to bully company co-founder Bill Lyon to up his bid three times — from an initial \$82 a share in early 2005 to \$109 this spring — for the shares not owned by Lyon, his execs or family. Nobody complains about an attorney when they help get you an extra 40 percent.

... AND DOWN IN MARKETING

The "Longest Year" Award: To **Disneyland** and its 50th anniversary. One would have thought the public would have tired of the celebration in '05, the real anniversary. But the extended party seems to have kept Disneyland as king of the Southern California tourism hill this year, too. Now we — and the competition — will have to suffer through "A year of a Million Dreams."

Comeback of the Year: To **Wet Seal**. This Foothill Ranch clothing retailer somehow regained its sales touch with its fickle key customers, young ladies. The company is producing quarterly profits after two money-losing years. Even with what seems to be a disappointing holiday season, the mall-based store operator's stock is up almost by a half this year — and six-fold since the summer of 2004.

Ad of the Year: To Ameriquest. In the biggest ad game of any year — the Super Bowl — this O.C. lender scored big with its two "Don't Judge Too Quickly" spots. Both ranked in USA Today's 10 best for the day. Ameriquest ads depicted odd moments that appeared even more embarrassing when seen out of context. Perhaps a foreshadowing of the sad plight of this company, now reportedly on the auction block.