

For All the Marbles

George O'Brien on February 16, 2009

Entré Computer Rolls Out an Aggressive Growth Strategy



The leadership team at Entré Computer, from left, Bob Bellamy, Andi Aigner, Robert Braceland, Liz Sotichack, and Norm Fiedler.

The landscape in the computer sales and service realm has changed considerably over the past quarter-century, with ever-improving technology and an evolving field of competitors.

Through it all, Entré Computer Center has remained a constant, enjoying steady growth fueled by a strong focus on the customer.

As the company marks 25 years in business, it is embarking on an aggressive growth strategy, one that seeks to add customers to the portfolio and expand the roster of services provided to existing clients. President Norm Fiedler says the key to success is simply doing more of what the company has always done —provide solutions, not merely products and services.

Norm Fiedler has been working in the technology field since around the birth of the personal computer. As president of the West Springfield-based Entré Computer Center, he works, and in many respects lives, in a world of bytes and hard drives, servers and high-speed printers. And while he's well-versed in all that, naturally, what he really likes to talk about is marbles. He has a large bowl full of them on the credenza in his office, along with a yellow polishing cloth. A booklet called *The Marbles* which he wrote, had published, and now distributes to customers and seemingly everyone else who might want a copy explains it all.

Life, he writes, is an accumulation of treasure, and the more abundant and brighter the treasure, the more rewarding and successful the life. Treasure, in this case, means marbles, with each one

representing someone that an individual has met in his or her life, he continued, listing family, friends, a next-door neighbor, a first girlfriend or boyfriend, schoolmates, and teachers.

These marbles, these relationships need to be polished, he said, noting that co-workers and clients are also marbles, and the fact that he treats them as such explains the solid, consistent growth of this company over the past quarter-century.

This is the basic philosophy that has defined this company, and my life really, said Fiedler. We're all about relationships and that's what differentiates us from our competitors."

And now, as the company celebrates that milestone quietly, Fiedler and his leadership team are preparing to grow that marble collection in a figurative, if not literal, sense, through aggressive expansion plans laid out over the past several months.

That plan calls for 20% to 25% annual growth (and those are conservative estimates) over the next several years, and to meet those goals, Fielder is relying on strong teamwork and a core of leaders specifically an expanded sales team charged with acquiring new business and essentially turning it over to account managers and customer-service representatives who will work to not only retain these additions to the portfolio but provide them with a evolving, expanding roster of services.

Leading the team will be Robert Braceland, vice president of sales and marketing, who came to the company about two years ago. He told Business West that his job boils down to customer acquisition, and he intends to do so across a wide spectrum of business sectors.

Other members of the team are vice president Andy Aigner, accounts manager Bob Bellamy, and Liz Sotichack, director of administration and human resource management, who Fiedler described as the glue of the company. They all have key roles in the relationship-building process, and for this issue, they talked with Business West about where they want to take this company and how they intend to reach that destination.

Crafting a Game Plan

Braceland called it a SLED business. That stands for state, local, and education, he explained, meaning, essentially, public-sector entities that comprise a significant niche in the technology-solutions-providing business.

And it's just one of many targets identified in Entré's growth strategy. Others include the health care sector, the retail (or point-of-sale) segment of the market, large companies meaning those with more than 500 employees and many others.

Adding business, or marbles, in each of these sectors, essentially comes down to taking market share from the many types of competitors in this market, said Braceland, listing everything from small technology solutions companies to national office-supply chains such as Staples. Entré will approach this exercise with an eye toward heavy emphasis on its strong customer-relations work, which he says comes down to partnering with the client to meet as many of its needs as possible. Partner is an overused term these days, Braceland acknowledged, but that's the best way to describe what we are and what we do. We partner with our clients to help them make the most of the opportunities that today's technology offers them.

It's been this way since Fiedler and business partner Kirk Barrell ended their search for a new, joint entrepreneurial venture back in 1983 by becoming part of a then-fledgling chain that eventually grew to 350 locations across North America (Fielders was No. 53). The West Springfield facility, located on Memorial Avenue, is just one of 11 remaining privately held entities that still have the Entré name, and the only one in this region.

I was looking for a new opportunity," said Fiedler, who worked for many years in sales and marketing for companies in the abrasives field. While with Bendix Corp., he met Barrell, and when the two found themselves unemployed after the company was sold, they invested significant time and energy deciding where to take their careers.

We were looking for something for the long term, he explained, and decided that the personal computer was where we wanted and needed to be. Much has changed since 1983, said Fiedler, noting that many of the chains and individual companies that Entré competed against back then, such as Computerland and MicroAge, are long gone, and technology continues to improve and evolve. Meanwhile, the scope of Entré's mission has changed as well; it began as a retail company and has evolved into a business-to-business entity focused much more on service. What remains constant, however, is the company's resolve to be not merely a provider of products and services, but a deliverer of solutions.

And what has fueled success has been that focus on relationships, he said, adding quickly that these come with both clients and employees, and both are equally important and also intertwined.

Most of our employees have been with us for a number of years, and our philosophy has always been employees first, he explained. Because if employees are happy and motivated and feel good about themselves and their company, they'll take good care of the customers."

It is this solid operating platform that Fiedler and other members of his team believe will support the company through its growth initiative and help it meet or exceed some aggressive goals.

Taking Their Best Shot

As he outlined that growth strategy for taking Entré to the next level, forged late last year, Braceland said it will have two main thrusts acquiring new customers across all those sectors he mentioned, and providing more services to those clients, as well as to a strong core of 200 existing customers. These services include everything from installation to network issues; parts to printer repairs; supplies to something called end-of-life work, meaning environmentally friendly disposition of equipment, a growing concern for green-conscious businesses of all sizes and an emerging opportunity for ventures like Entré.

As companies come out of older technologies, including PCs, servers, printers, and empty toner cartridges, they're faced with the question of what to do with it," said Braceland, adding that helping them find an answer is a relatively recent addition to Entré's roster of services. The worst thing they can do is take it to the landfill, first because this equipment is hazardous to the environment, and secondly, because there's potentially confidential data sitting on those devices.

What we do is provide corporations with options as far as protecting their data and disposing of what's called E-waste, he continued, adding that Entré has been successful in adding this work on to other services ranging from hard-drive sweeping to print management.

Describing the latter, he said it comes down to helping companies reduce their printing costs across the board and make the most effective use of the technology they' re invested in.

Overall, said Aigner, who brings many years of experience in the food-service industry to his role at the company, Entré has shown the willingness over the years to make what he calls " investments" in the customer and service to same, and this won't change as the company grows. What will change, though, if all goes expected, is the number of investments being made.

Bellamy said that the main goal, and the primary challenge, for Entré is to get that proverbial foot in the door at companies and public entities like school departments. Once it does so, he's confident that the company can get all the way in.

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If people give us the opportunity to show what we can do, we make the most of that opportunity, he explained. If we get a chance, we perform, and we win. That's how we're going to win market share.”

Braceland concurred. He said Entré and its sales team has been cultivating new customers and relationships for the past year or so this is a lengthy process that usually takes several months — and that this work is starting to bear fruit. Once the company gets its foot in the door, he continued, it goes about the process of gaining the trust of the client.

In this business, as in all others, trust must be earned, and this is accomplished by meeting and exceeding expectations, anticipating client needs, and then devising strategies to meet them.

Our aggressive goals for growth will be met through what I call efficient customer life-cycle management,” he explained, adding that this comes down to consistently adding services for existing customers while efficiently managing the client base.

Time to Shine

Summing up where Entré stands with implementation of its growth strategy, Fiedler said, we're at the 10-yard line, with 90 yards to go. But there is no shortage of confidence that this team will reach the end zone, because of the expertise and determination it brings to the assignment.

Not to mention that philosophy that has propelled Fiedler and other team makers for a quarter century the notion of marbles, continually polishing them, and growing the collection.

If all goes as planned, Fiedler may need a bigger bowl for that credenza.

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