

Innovation, focus on clients fuel steady growth

BY JOHN LARRABEE

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The closed-circuit TV cameras used at a Woonsocket apartment complex provided only limited help when security problems arose. It took days to review the footage, and when the right images were found, they were grainy.

PC Troubleshooters Inc., changed that. The Warwick company installed 10 digital network cameras, all linked to a server running Exacq software. The new system allows staff to view images from anywhere, using a PC, a laptop or an iPhone. And with the click of a mouse, a camera can focus on a face or license plate, or provide immediate playback of recent footage. The images are crystal clear, not fuzzy like those usually seen on TV news reports.

"Three years ago this was all very new," said Eric Shorr, president of PC Troubleshooters, providers of IT support and consulting services, managed services, disaster-recovery solutions and maintenance of computers, networks, servers, workstations and appliances. "But I was reading articles and going to seminars. I'm passionate about innovation and using technology to provide better service to our clients. I'm in a continual process of learning how to do things better."

That helps explain why PC Troubleshooters has appeared on Providence Business News lists of the fastest-growing companies in Rhode Island for several years running. This year it ranks No. 20 among companies with up to \$5 million in 2010 sales, with a 20 percent, or \$300,000, sales growth compared to 2008. Many of the businesses that share that distinction are part of the so-called knowledge economy, the marketplace of science and ideas. They're expanding despite difficult times because they keep up with technology, they look for innovative strategies and they've found skilled and talented employees.

"It's a simple recipe," said Shorr. "But it's something you have to work on every day. In this business you can't stop, even for a few weeks, because overnight everything might be different."

At PC Troubleshooters, staying on top of technological change is only half the challenge. The company has to ensure that clients know what their IT provider can do, or what services might be best for them. Shorr makes it his business to keep them informed and educated. For example, his company recently hosted a seminar on a new computer-security law in Massachusetts. And the company president often invites clients to lunch-and-learn sessions at his office.

You might think **The Claflin Co.**, by comparison, is a stodgy outfit. After all, the Warwick-based company has been around for almost two centuries. But through the years, the business has been reinvented several times, always adapting to new economic trends. Old catalogs show the company was once selling pharmaceuticals that some might now dismiss as "snake-oil remedies."



PBN PHOTO/BRIAN MCDONALD

NO TROUBLE: Warwick-based PC Troubleshooters has become a mainstay on PBN's Fastest Private Growing Companies list. Pictured above is Carlos Aldana, the company's director of remote service.

Today the company, ranked No. 13 among companies with \$25 million or more in sales in 2010 and sporting a 23 percent, or \$30 million, sales growth from 2008, is on an entirely different course. And the latest changes have paid off.

When Ted Almon, the current CEO and president, purchased Claflin in 1976, he set about transforming it into the No. 1 distributor of medical equipment and supplies in southern New England. It is also a company that, in recent years, can boast of consistent growth.

Like Shorr, Almon finds himself constantly reviewing new technology. "There's cutting edge," he advised, "and then there's bleeding edge. Some things are just ahead of their time."

Almon also works closely with clients to steer them toward innovative solutions. His most notable success came in 1986, when he encouraged executives at **Women & Infants Hospital** to move to a just-in-time inventory system. Almon made the suggestion when the Providence hospital was in the process of constructing a new facility. The location was a tight fit, and architects were looking for ways to conserve space. The new system proved to be so efficient, it is now used by more than 600 hospitals nationwide.

"Just-in-time" is not something we invented," Almon said. "The credit probably goes to Japanese car makers. Instead of keeping warehouses full of parts, they shifted the job back to vendors. But it had never been done with hospitals. They still had those full warehouses. We took over

that job, and supplemented it with more frequent deliveries. That improved their cash flow. And for us, when you're working with a dozen hospitals, you can automate things and do everything at less cost."

Innovation is impossible without a skilled and educated staff, of course. That's why tech companies big and small are constantly investing in employee training. PC Troubleshooters, for example, spends more than \$30,000 each year to send its 12 employees to conferences and courses.

At **Woodard & Curran**, a national engineering and environmental-consulting outfit, that amount is just a drop in the bucket. The company employs almost 600 people in 10 offices up and down the East Coast, including about 50 in Providence. They're mostly engineers and scientists, and the company constantly encourages them to build their talents and refresh their skills.

To keep careers growing – and business thriving – Woodard & Curran offers reimbursements for tuition, conference participation, registration fees and dues for membership in professional associations. Earning a professional certification means a bonus reward. And employee compensation is generous, according to Glenn Almquist, senior vice president and energy market leader.

"We have one of the lowest employee-turnover rates in the industry," he said. "We have established a company culture that attracts good people." This year the company ranks No. 18 among companies with \$25 million or more in sales in 2010,

with 11 percent, or \$6.9 million, sales growth compared to 2008.

In Rhode Island, Woodard & Curran works with defense contractor **Electric Boat**, the waste treatment giant **Synagro Technologies**, **Toray Plastics (America) Inc.**, and a number of cities and towns. The consulting outfit is organized to allow those clients to use the skills of anyone on staff, not just those in the Providence office. "We can draw on people from any city to work on any project," said Almquist, who heads up the Rhode Island operation. "Our offices are not profit centers."

That same emphasis on finding and keeping talented staff can be found in creative industries as well. Just ask Stephen Rosa, president and CEO of **(add)ventures**, the Providence marketing and communications firm that has turned up time and time again on the lists of fast-growing companies. This year the company ranks No. 17 on the list for companies with between \$5 million and \$25 million in 2010 sales, with 1 percent, or \$120,000, in sales growth compared to 2008.

"In the recent recession — the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression — we made a bold decision to keep our entire team in place," Rosa said. "It would have been easier to lay off staff but we felt it was important to keep our strategic and creative family intact. That loyalty to our employees is rewarded by their outstanding service to our clients."

According to Rosa, his clients — the list includes **CVS Caremark Corp.** and **Hasbro Inc.** — have reaped the benefits of that arrangement. "In a service business, happy employees make for happy clients," he said. "As the crisis subsides, we have a leg up on our competitors who slashed payroll and suddenly have to rebuild." ■

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ERIC SHORR

PC Troubleshooters president