

A Certain Vision

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Teamwork, service and foresight – traditional values all – have kept this one-time startup atop the digital media revolution.

TEVER THINK ABOUT WHAT makes the scoreboard work when sitting at a Bucs game at Raymond James Stadium? Highly doubtful.

But the folks at Tampa's Professional Communications Systems (PCS) sure do. Indeed, thanks to PCS, Bucs fans can catch all of the action from anywhere in the stadium.

The growing company, which is owned by media conglomerate Media General, designed and installed a sophisticated, high-tech video control system and multimedia display system for the local team. It designed something similar for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays.

Quite simply, PCS designs, installs and maintains sophisticated audio and video communications systems, and does it in a very sophisticated way.

PCS's history is similar to thousands of small, successful companies all over the country: It was started by three guys with know-how wanting to make a go of their own business.

The year was 1985.



Bill Blush, Rich Merriam and Fran Fehr worked in the industry for several years, and business was

booming.

Blush, now PCS's vice president of sales, says he and his comrades were almost pioneers in the nascent field. And for him, the timing was right.

He puts it like this: "I thought if I am going to do this, I better get it done now. You get into this entrepreneurial mode where you think you can do it better than anyone else, and you just do it."

Another plus at the time, says Blush, is that he and his partners were well established as local experts in a new and growing industry. "It was just the right combo at the right time," says the PCS veteran.

PCS started with one engineer and two salesmen providing audio and video equipment and repair services to television stations and corporate AV facilities locally.



I SEE YOU Ray "Tony" Stephens, president, and Bill Blush, VP of sales at Professional Communications Systems, in Tampa know a thing or two about audiovisual technology.

It now has about 40 employees, 25 at the Tampa headquarters and the remainder at offices in Orlando, Fort Lauderdale, Miami, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Pensacola and Albany, GA.

Along the way, client Media General took such an interest in PCS that in 1996 it purchased the growing company. Blush and Merriam stayed, while Fehr retired shortly after. Media General remains a client, but it generates only a small percentage of PCS's business, according to President Ray "Tony" Stephens.

Stephens says the buyout was a blessing as the cost of equipment was accelerating at the same time technology was rapidly – and constantly – changing.

Blush concurs: "The timing was perfect: We were looking to expand and grow, and the purchase allowed us to pursue our business to the next level of expansion."

Merriam today is a senior systems engineer and project manager, while Blush runs the sales operation. Stephens, a GTE (now Verizon) veteran, came on the year before the merger as sales manager, and today he oversees the company as general manager and president.

Growth Strategies

for Business

It's easy to say PCS designs sophisticated audio and video communications systems. But what does that mean?

Basically, PCS offers soup-to-nuts services for customers in terms of audiovisual and broadcast services. Most of the audiovisual business is in Florida, while broadcast services are nationwide.

PCS consults with companies about their needs and, once a feasibility study is done, provides the rest. "We design the systems, procure equipment from any number of the 250 manufacturers we represent, plan the space, provide project management services, integration and installation, service and repair, maintenance agreement and training," says Blush. "You name it, we do it."

While the early years were about simply reselling and installing other people's products, a transition was made, according to Stephens. Today it is just as much about design and engineering and other services. "We invest a lot of time and money understanding the current and rising intellectual properties, and that is an integral part of our business," he says. Also, he says, PCS does its job with as little disruption to the client as possible.

PCS uses the term 'Solutions Visualized' in its marketing. Stephens says this speaks to the idea that it is a visual communications company able to help many different types of clients.

Pro teams like the Bucs and the Rays are just one segment of PCS's client base. A host of small and large corporations locally and elsewhere also utilize the company's expertise and services.

ANOTHER WELL-KNOWN AUDIOVISUAL CLIENT is Nielsen Media Research. Several years ago, the large media research firm was consolidating multiple operations and moving into a new 610,000-square-foot facility in Oldsmar.

The company's needs were myriad: state-of-the-art presentation technology for dozens of meeting rooms; video and audio conferencing; multiple demonstration areas; flexible, modular conference rooms; and training and maintenance services. "We worked closely with Nielsen to define their needs and coordinated all stages of a multi-phase build-out," says Stephens. PCS also provided a multi-functional auditorium and an external, complex-wide sound system.

Today, PCS continues to service Nielsen. Denise Papich, director of facilities for Nielsen, says that PCS easily won the initial contract for the build-out. "We felt more comfortable with the thoroughness of how they presented all of the numbers and details to us," she says. "I feel they brought new ideas and concepts to us and showed us the best technology uses for our money."

While Papich and her team were quite happy with PCS's work, when the second phase came along they still sent the



SO MANY SCREENS A demonstration area at Nielsen Media Research.

project out for bid. Again PCS was the clear winner. "They've been very customer-focused and we are happy with their work overall," she says, adding that they continue to use PCS.

Other customers include educational institutions, corporate auditoriums, call centers and many broadcast stations. Some local stations include WFLA-TV Channel 8 (owned by Media General), WFTS-TV Channel 28 and the Pinellas County Government's public access channel.

When PCS worked with Channel 8, the station needed to be transformed into an all-digital facility while combining its production and operation centers with the *Tampa Tribune* and Tampa Bay Online (www.TBO.com), all Media General holdings. One of the challenges was to integrate existing equipment into the new facility in order to cut costs. Another was putting together a fully digital (tapeless) control facility with simultaneous multiple video and information streams accessible by multiple users in a shared news environment.

Stephens says the project was a success: "Now it is user friendly and all of the personnel can manage the news content from acquisition to delivery."

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES is keeping up with changes in technology. "This is the challenge today," says Blush, who says he read somewhere that technology has changed more in the last ten years than in the last 100 years.

Since the company is owned by Media General, itself close to a billion-dollar company, Stephens and Blush say they cannot disclose financials. They do acknowledge the company is growing, however. "We've had very solid growth every year since Media General acquired us," says Stephens. "PCS has completed thousands of installations over the years, ranging from small projects of several thousand dollars to others upward of \$3-5 million."

He adds that the firm's larger installations in Florida

“We invest a lot of time and money understanding the current and rising intellectual properties.”

include WFLA-TV in Tampa, WMFE-TV in Orlando, the Nielsen Media Research Center in Oldsmar and the Naval Air Station in Pensacola.

While the company (www.pcomsys.com) is growing solidly, employee growth stays somewhere between five and 10 percent annually. PCS is able to handle incrementally more business with about the same employees, says Blush, partly because of improvements in technology and because the organization is run very tightly.

“We are all about collaboration here,” says Stephens. “We work as a team, make decisions as a team. There is not much that is done on an individual decision-making basis, and that is a real strength of our organization.”

Blush says that even when someone is hired for one department, people from other departments interview them. “We are a family here and wouldn’t want to stick the wrong person in with our team. The personalities have to match.”

When asked about being successful and how long it took to get there, Blush, who at 58 still works 50-hour weeks, is modest. “I’m still working on it,” he quips. “I have goals to achieve before I consider myself successful, whether they are business or family. But at some level we’ve been successful for all of our careers.”

Chuck Sumner, broadcast engineer specialist for Pinellas County’s production studios, agrees with that last sentiment. Sumner says he worked with PCS before it became PCS. Back then the engineer worked for GE and Martin Marietta and used Blush and his buddies’ services for his work.

“I’ve worked with them since 1982,” says Sumner. “I can tell you they have always been there for service and reliability. Probably the most important thing is they’ve always known what questions to ask to make sure I got what I needed, and if I didn’t, then they would ask them for me. They are just real people.”



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