

Map for success

Tech firm plots course in Wooster

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Some 15 years ago, Dee and Mary Vaidya gathered at the kitchen table of their Wooster home to talk about starting a business, unsure of what they even wanted to do.

This year, the company that resulted from that discussion employs 450 worldwide, has annual revenue of about \$45 million, and serves customers that range from the Department of Homeland Security to industry giants like Chrysler and Boeing.

TechniGraphics Inc. is in the business of digital mapping and computer-automated design.

Digital mapping is what kicked the business into high gear in 2003, when TechniGraphics won a 10-year contract award with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA).

Digital mapping is the process of taking satellite images (and, at one time, paper maps and photographs) and tracing all of their features — roads, buildings, even vegetation — into a computerized database. Think MapQuest, Google World and automobile GPS navigation systems.

"They have intelligence to them so you can ask a question of the computer and it will answer you by drawing a map on the fly," Dee Vaidya said. (He's the company's president and chief executive officer. Mary is vice president and chief operating officer.)

After being named as one of just six prime contractors for the federal work, TechniGraphics literally grew through its roof.

New headquarters, where 170 employees now work, were built off state Route 585 in Wooster two years ago. The building is the centerpiece of a 60-acre parcel that the Vaidyas envision as a future campus.

Revenue grew from less than \$5 million in 2002 to about \$45 million in 2007.

How it all started

The Vaidyas have come a long way since the start of the 1990s, when they were living in Canada. Dee, trained in chemical engineering, worked in the rubber and plastics industry.

But the couple decided that Mary's hometown of Wooster was a more fitting place to raise their children, so they moved here with the idea of starting some kind of business.

When Dee mentioned this to friends during a visit to India (he was born in Bombay), they took him on a tour of their own company, where they digitized maps.

"I'd never heard of it. I had no clue," Vaidya said. But he was a general all-purpose businessman — he has a master's degree in business from Purdue University — so he agreed to be the company's representative in America.

His first deal came quickly, boosted by a law that had been passed requiring banks and mortgage companies to take out flood insurance for at-risk properties before selling those mortgages to another lender.

Overnight, the companies responsible for making those flood-hazard determinations went from researching 100 properties a day to 5,000 a day.

"There was no way they could do it manually anymore. They needed their flood maps computerized," Vaidya said.

Next, Vaidya sought to stretch the company's reach to the U.S. government, which wasn't eager to send its work overseas. But a contact in one federal office was kind enough to pass on the names and phone numbers of some other contractors who might have work for them.

In making those calls, Vaidya learned that Johnson Controls was trying to sell a tiny mapping division it had in Fort Collins, Colo., called Technicolor Graphic Services.

Vaidya kept an eye on developments and at the end of the year, no buyer had come forward and the staff had been pared back from 50 to 10 people.

"Now I could afford it, so I bought it," Vaidya said. And just like that, the Vaidyas became federal contractors, since Johnson Controls already had a deal with the Defense Mapping Agency (which evolved into today's NGA.).

"Initially we started sending some work to India with their approval, but defense work couldn't go overseas," Vaidya said.

So the Vaidyas and their India connection parted ways and Dee Vaidya began a long-distance commute, spending every other week in Fort Collins in a living space he converted above the office.

Back in Wooster, TechniGraphics' office was still the kitchen table.

Big breaks

The next twist of fate came in 1996, when the late Don Noble — the chief executive who helped put Rubbermaid Inc. on the map — befriended the Vaidyas. Noble became a shareholder and chairman of the board.

"He convinced us, if you're serious about growing this company, you need to move out of the house," Vaidya said, so the company rented a basement in downtown Wooster and hired a couple of employees.

The company did fairly well over the next few years, but its breakout moment came in 2002, when it applied to become a prime contractor for NGA.

"We were thinking, how can we compete against the big boys?" Vaidya said, pointing out competitors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

But NGA had set aside part of its budget to even the playing field for small businesses, and at the end of 2002, TechniGraphics and five other companies were awarded 10-year contracts.

The main project is digitally mapping the globe, one country at a time. That includes nautical charts for safe navigation of ships, buildings and infrastructure of urban cities, and every foot of the vast terrain in between.

The prestige of the assignment has led to contracts with other companies and friendly governments and spurred TechniGraphics' acquisition of four U.S. and European companies.

Need to diversify

But such a narrow business focus could be foolhardy, and the Vaidyas knew they needed to diversify.

Last year, they created a division that helps engineer product parts for clients, using the same kind of data conversion knowledge used in digital mapping.

Central to the service is computer-assisted design, or "CAD," where ideas are put into 3-D graphics so products can be visualized, tweaked and tested before even leaving the computer screen. Recent customers include Boeing, Airbus, Chrysler, Toyota and Honda.

As for the future, "we have some big dreams," Vaidya said. "What we'd love to do is follow in Don Noble's footsteps and build a Fortune 500 company," although not necessarily a publicly traded one, he was quick to add.

But regardless of how big TechniGraphics gets, the headquarters always will be in Wooster, Vaidya said. "It's a perfect location here and we have no difficulty finding the right people to move to Wooster."

Rod Crider, president of the Wayne Economic Development Council, said TechniGraphics is the model of how the entrepreneurial spirit can impact a community.

"TechniGraphics is rapidly gaining equal stature as one of Wayne County's leading businesses and (they) are demonstrating how innovation and technology can drive business growth," Crider said.

Acknowledging that the company could do its work from anywhere in the world, "We are deeply appreciative of that fact and thankful that TechniGraphics chose Wayne County and Wooster as their corporate home," Crider said. "The work being done there is unique to Ohio and represents the knowledge jobs of the future."

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