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Savvy Solutions

Computer co. runs better thanks to change in customer-billing process

Operation 'running well' instead of 'running on others' pain,' thanks to change
Daniel C. Bartel
Staff Writer

New companies are created for a myriad of reasons.

George Fassett, president and CEO of Thumbtechs Corp. in Fort Worth, started his company because he was fed up.

"I was upset. I didn't like my (existing) company," he said.

Thumbtechs, which handles computer service and support, came from an earlier venture Fassett started called G.F.I.T. (George Fassett Information Technology) while a student at Texas Christian University in the mid-1990s.

As at most fix-it shops, G.F.I.T. technicians charged by the hour, billing clients \$200 just to show up. Fassett felt the customer's pain in dollars: the worse the problem, the more hours billed and heftier the fees.

Unfortunately, customers usually wait for problems to reach their absolute worst before calling. Though great for business, it was terrible for the customer.

Eventually, Fassett hit an emotional wall.

"My customers didn't like me," he said. "The only time they called was when they had serious problems. I couldn't continue like that."

Exasperated, Fassett went to a dry-erase board in November 2000 and sketched an outline of what would become the basic Thumbtechs model: subscription-based support. Instead of paying an hourly rate, customers would buy a package for unlimited service. A Thumbtechs technician would make an onsite visit once a week to update the client's equipment and check for problems. Customers would never have to pay beyond their usual rate except for the cost of new equipment.

"I said I could save the customer money by making computers run better, and people thought I was crazy," Fassett said. "What they didn't realize is the more stable you are, the more profitable you are."

The proof is in the bottom line. Four years since making the switch, Thumbtechs has gone from 10 customers to 34, totaling 600 individual users. Annual gross revenue when the company started in 2001 was around \$200,000. By the end of 2004, Thumbtechs, which services small- and medium-size companies, will have raked in nearly \$1 million.



Switching models:
He didn't like his business, so he changed it.

Photo: David Pellerin

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"Our technicians don't sit around waiting for the customer to call. They're out there with the customer -- in person," said Rob Fassett, lead technician and George's younger brother.

George Fassett, 30, was hardwired for computers at an early age. While most children were learning their ABC's, Fassett was writing computer code on his Commodore 64, one of the earliest personal computers. A native of Watertown, N.Y., he received a full scholarship through the Charles Tandy Grant and attended TCU.

Hands-on

Fassett learned the computer maintenance business working to install Internet networks in new dorms at TCU. After graduation in 1996, he quit his TCU job and founded G.F.I.T. with only a few staff members.

Business chugged along at a moderate pace until a tornado hit downtown Fort Worth in 2000, knocking out electrical systems and damaging businesses. The phones went into a ringing frenzy from customers calling for help. Among Fassett's many tasks was to repair computer systems at the former Bank One building in downtown Fort Worth, now called The Tower.

The tornado catapulted Fassett's repair business and eventually led to a change in the way business was done. High profits wouldn't be based on billing hours as a result of natural or manmade disasters, he said. The company would no longer profit from customer misfortune.

As the tornado changed much of downtown Fort Worth, so too did Fassett's company emerge newer and more durable.

"Only now, we're running well instead of running on others' pain," he said.