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Making Noise Is 2010 Exporting Duo's Expertise

MARTINSBURG, W.Va. – Scott Hedges and Mike Grady make a powerful team. As president and vice president of Power Sonix Inc., located in Martinsburg, this dynamic duo has designed and manufactured the most effective aircraft loud hailer systems available, gaining them a worldwide reputation.

It is this distinction that has led to Hedges and Grady being selected as the U.S. Small Business Administration's 2010 **Small Business Exporter of the Year** for West Virginia.

Power Sonix originated in 1997 in the basement of Hedges' home under the name Applied Electro-Mechanics Inc. Both men were previously employed at Applied Electro Mechanics Inc. in Point of Rocks, Md., Hedges as the plant manager and Grady as director of research and development.

"We tried to keep our new name similar to that of the original company so we could continue to do business with the foreign companies we were dealing with through our overseas agent at the time," Hedges said. "We just added a hyphen to the old name."

In 1995, Grady developed the world's first, light-weight neodymium magnet, compression driver for high-powered speech projection devices used on ships and aircraft. The device was the precursor to the current technology used in the hailer systems now manufactured at Power Sonix.

It was just after the design of the light-weight driver that the company was sold to a British multinational firm allowing Hedges and Grady to strike out on their own as entrepreneurs.

"The firm wanted us to go to work for them but we decided we could do better as their competitor," Grady said.

What makes the loud hailer system so attractive to those in the aviation field is the minimal weight, compact design, and compatibility with most cockpit audio controllers. The system is engineered to project extremely clear speech and sounds over the noise of engines, rotors and other conditions at distances over a mile.

"A good example of the effectiveness of our system happened in Oregon in March," Grady said. "A 4-year-old girl was located in the rugged terrain around her home after being missing 28 hours when she recognized her grandmother's recorded voice being projected from an airplane circling a quarter mile above her. That gives you an idea as to the clarity of the speech projection capacity of our system."

"We are probably 95 percent recognized as the world leader in this type of technology in speech communication," he added.

The company exports to over 20 countries worldwide which accounts for nearly 95 percent of their business. In the United States, sales have been primarily airborne law enforcement organizations in seven states, but domestic sales are steadily growing as a result of word of mouth and reputation.

“The airborne segment of the law enforcement is a small community and a niche market,” Grady said. “They talk among each other at trade shows and via the Internet and those with our system tell others ‘if you want to talk to someone from the air, you need a Power Sonix system.’”

Hedges recalls an overseas incident where the Power Sonix system was being used to relay instructions at an event alongside of a competitors system. “The commander couldn’t understand what was being said through the other system but ours was crystal clear. Needless to say, we made a few more sales after that day.”

Both men realize they manufacture a well-made, successful product that fills a specific need in a niche market.

“It’s a great product when there is a need, but there has to be a need,” Grady said. “And with the durability of the system, they generally have a 10- to 12-year life span and a less than 1 percent return rate, it’s good in one sense, but in terms of resale, we don’t have as many opportunities to make a sale.”

As far as advice to other businesses looking into the world of exporting, Hedges and Grady offer the following: “Be realistic about your expectations; pursue quality and excellence in your products; make your customer relationships as personal as you can; persistence and believe in yourself is an absolute requirement; and deep pockets wouldn’t hurt either.”

Scott Hedges and Michael Grady were nominated by Nancy Ferner, business analyst at the West Virginia Small Business Development Center – Eastern Panhandle Center.

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