

Growing pains

How Steven Battista grew ACS during down times **By Lindsey Grant**

When Steven Battista started Advanced Communication Solutions in 1998, he faced a problem familiar to many entrepreneurs — his company lacked a strong client base and credibility in the marketplace.

Battista created ACS, a company that provides communication solutions for businesses, after the company he previously worked for was acquired. And he turned to acquisitions when he faced the problem of getting his new company known in the marketplace.

In 1999, ACS acquired Sunrise Telecommunications, which had been in business since 1987 and had an established reputation in South Florida. With that acquisition came customers and credibility for ACS.

Since then, the company has grown rapidly. From 2001 to 2003, gross revenue increased 74 percent and it recently opened an office in Atlanta, with plans for offices throughout the Southeast in addition to its office in Cincinnati.

Smart Business spoke with Battista about how he has grown ACS in an unstable industry and how he delivers quality customer service.

Q: How have you continued to grow while the telecom industry has suffered?

We are in an industry that has really struggled during the past three or four years. Through that timeframe, we have constantly increased our business and have expanded into new markets. While other people were downsizing and their revenues were shrinking, we were adding new people and increasing our revenue.

I think we hire the best people. I think that the people that work for our company love the business a little bit more than the competition. That is really the key to our success.

We put a lot of time and effort into the recruiting process. We have very good quality employees that are caring and have an attitude of, 'What can we do to make the company better and to be a better company to do business with?'

Q: How do you face the challenges that come with being an industry that is constantly changing?

I think that has a lot to do with having good people and just staying focused on the future and not becoming complacent, meaning that every month, there is new product or service out there. We're really big on training our



salespeople, service people and support people so we can stay on top of all the changes, so we can make the proper recommendations to customers.

Q: As you continue to grow and add clients, how are you maintaining quality customer service?

We went through our own growing pains. As we've grown so quickly, that's an area that we are sensitive to, because quite frankly, we've had issues in the past. I'm not saying that we don't provide good customer service, but because we have grown so quickly, we've

had to add additional people. That's something we're very sensitive to.

The way we do that is (by) adding the appropriate people when needed. We judge how quickly we are able to respond to our clients and if we are able to respond in the timeframe that we say we are going to. Because of that, we have had to expand office space and increase our IT infrastructure to support it.

We have a call center down in Deerfield, that no matter whether you are a customer in Ohio, Georgia or any part of Florida, when you put a service call in, you are going to our service center there. We try to take all calls in less than nine seconds.

Then, if a customer has an emergency service, meaning their system is down, we like to be at the customer site within one to four hours. This is 24/7. If it's a non-emergency service call, (we arrive at the customer site) typically the same day or the following day.

Back in February, we hired an HR director because of the growth and because of the need to continually bring good people in. Her job is making sure we bring in the right quality people to the organization.

Q: With so many new people coming in, how do you train them to ensure that your business doesn't suffer?

The majority of the training is probably coming in for sales and service (employees). We have very comprehensive initial training that all new hires go through from a technology standpoint.

The best way to explain our training is perpetual. It's not a two-week crash course and that's all the training they get.

Sales reps probably spend, on average, two to three days a month in some form of training. From a technical standpoint, our technicians and support people are constantly going to get recertified from the manufacturer, as well as our internal training.

I would say that that is one of our hallmarks — the comprehensive training we provide our employees.

HOW TO REACH: Advanced Communication Solutions, (800) 841-1ACS or www.2acs.com