

Home-Grown

HIGH TECH

By Pierce Hoover

A TRIO OF NEW CENTRAL FLORIDA TECH FIRMS ARE POISED FOR NATIONAL SUCCESS

»» The Florida High Tech Corridor — a loosely defined region of high tech companies stretching from Daytona Beach to Tampa Bay — has become a fecund region for software and tech startups. The following is the story of three such home-grown high tech firms. All three had their genesis in the Orlando area, and all are now poised to move from local success to national prominence.

MYDEA TECHNOLOGIES

More than a decade after earning a B.S. in aerospace engineering and an M.S. in mechanical engineering from the University of Central Florida, Michael Siemer is at his alma mater. Only this time, it's business.

After graduation, Siemer joined the Walt Disney Corporation as a project engineer and was involved in a number of exciting developments, including the design of the \$100 million Mission Space attraction. Along the way, he gained expertise in the evolving field of rapid prototyping, and developed a vision for the new opportunities this technology could provide.

In 2002, he left Disney to form Mydea Technologies.

"Basically, [Mydea] is a 3-D Kinkos," he explains. "We convert concepts and 3-D files to physical products using layer-based manufacturing."

As compared to traditional prototyping methods, this provides both cost and time advantages to the customer, he says. "The best

PHOTO COURTESY OF MYDEA TECHNOLOGIES

application is for small-to medium-size components, and our clients' needs range from architecture modeling, general mechanical and military projects to medical and entertainment industry support. Our largest customer base is small companies hoping to bring new products to market, cost effectively."

A specific example of rapid prototyping for medical projects includes the constructing of accurate models of both hard and soft tissues using sources that include X-rays, photos and MRI scans, says Siemer. For example, Mydea could create a model of a damaged skull, a joint or even a heart valve to be used for surgical planning, practice or as a model for surgical reconstruction.

Key to Siemer's initial success has been a partnership with the UCF Technology Incubator. Located in the Central Florida Research Park, adjacent to the University, the Incubator was created to nurture start-up high tech ventures.

"Acceptance into this program has been critical to our success, it's a lot more than just cheap rent," he says. "[The incubator] provides shared resources; we are surrounded by tech companies and like-minded persons, which is good for moral support. It's a whole lot better than sitting home in your loft, trying to start a technology business in a vacuum."

In addition to physical facilities, the Incubator provides access to advisors and the University's human resources. For example, the Mydea Web site was developed by interns from UCF and the Full Sail media arts college, he says.

"A big part of the incubator process is having guidance from the staff on things like business plans," he says, "and also networking for services and customers. The system allows us to grow at our own pace — we're about to move into a third office within the facility — and when the time comes, we will eventually outgrow the incubator and move out."

One of Siemer's long-term goals for Mydea is to expand from prototyping into custom manufacturing, where the customer could use the additive manufacturing processes to create their own parts or products on demand.



RIPTIDE SOFTWARE

In the early '90s, Central Florida's high tech talent pool received a major infusion when 35 top programmers were recruited from around the nation to form a software development team for the Iridium satellite system. Their challenge was to create a ground control software package that could manage a worldwide network of 66 low-earth-orbit satellites in real time.

The successful completion of this project, and the lack of new complex software challenges that followed, left a lot of talent looking for opportunities that would allow them to remain in the area — and to the creation of several boutique software development firms. The most successful of these startups was Riptide Software, which was founded in late 1995 to create configurable enterprise software products, meaning software that can be matched to any company's needs and applied across the entire organization.

For the past several years, Riptide has been involved in the development of military training software for the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps. Recently, the company designed, developed and deployed a Mobile Automated Instrumentation Suite to Ft. Hood, Texas, which provides large-scale command, control and communications capabilities for real-time simulation and control over war game exercises for up to 2,000 concurrent players. Also in development is the Digital Multipurpose Range Complex, a command and communications system for testing military tank engagements on live fire test ranges.

"One reason for our success was our

ability to take the long view on where technology would be in five years," recalls Riptide co-founder and CEO Phillip Loeffel. "We were attracted to Java at a time when most people considered it to be a small Web technology. We became an early adopter, and by the time everyone else came around, we were established as the number one provider in Florida."

Loeffel feels that the relatively small size of Riptide also gave them an advantage as it allows for innovation and rapid product development. The company has been recognized three years in a row (2001-2003) in the Deloitte & Touche *North American Fast 500*, a listing of the fastest growing high tech companies.

"The Orlando area is a vibrant environment for smaller companies," he says. "A lot of area customers are willing to utilize small niche players who can innovate and provide rapid product development. This attitude allows smaller startup companies to thrive, and these are also the type of companies that attract the most creative minds, because they feel they have the freedom to innovate."

There is ample room for continued growth in the Central Florida software cluster, Loeffel says, and ample local opportunities for his products in areas ranging from military simulation to the hospitality industry.

"Increasingly, we find some of our best markets in our own backyard," he says. "We have national and international customers, but with software, which is not a product that can be touched or felt, many customers feel more comfortable dealing face to face."

MASTERLINK CORPORATION

Kent Weisner fell in love with Central Florida when he was transferred here in the early '70s by Ohio-based Anchor Hocking Glass. So much so that when the company requested his return to Ohio, he instead chose to resign, remain in Orlando and go into business for himself manufacturing skylights.

Success and a subsequent sale of the business provided a hiatus for sailing and traveling, followed by a second entrepreneurial stint creating a technical staffing and predictive engineering firm. His interest in increasing workplace efficiency brought him in contact with the Institute for Simulation and Training (IST) at the University of Central Florida (UCF). The Institute has earned national recognition for its work on modeling and simulation technology in the fields of education and training. Collaboration with IST — coupled with the leadership of MasterLink co-founder Gary Fenimore, software architect Ken Levine, software exec-

utive/investor Ralph Reichard (now Chairman), plus advisory board participation and investment by Philip Crosby, the late Quality Management guru — provided the genesis and financial support needed to form MasterLink.

The company provides innovative software solutions such as the Intelligent Work Management® (IWM) System. This Web-enabled, mobile-computing application maximizes management and worker resources while also improving customer service and reducing maintenance and operating costs.

"At the two venues where we first applied IWM, we doubled productive capacity in two years," Weisner says. "The clients were thrilled."

Having achieved success on a local scale, MasterLink sought out larger national clients, including the Office of Naval Research. MasterLink's outlook for growth and expansion is strong, Weisner says.


"After last summer's round of hurricanes, we rebounded fantastically," he

says. "The software we are developing can actually improve response times and effectiveness for emergency management organizations supported by FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]."

Attracting good talent has not been an issue, Weisner says, as there is a strong local talent base, and recruitment from outside the region is not difficult.

"The cost of living is very attractive and selling someone on moving [here] isn't hard."

In addition, he says the business climate is favorable for such ventures.

"We received initial funding from the TRDA [Technological Research and Development Authority, a Florida entity created to promote high tech business development statewide] and despite the tech bubble burst, we were able to raise \$3.5 million from angel investors and management. Central Florida is an area where, if you have a good idea, plus experienced and dedicated people that are both persistent and tenacious, you can make it fly." 

**A TERRITORY IDEAL FOR GROWTH.
AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM
READY TO NURTURE IT.**



Our service area in the Carolinas and Florida is one of the most vibrant areas of the country. One of thriving communities, diverse industries and a skilled, motivated workforce. It's no surprise that so many companies locate here. And why they increasingly turn to Progress Energy's award-winning economic development team to assist them. We offer full-service support, from site selection to government contacts to energy expertise. The relentless pursuit of excellence. It's what we're all about.

 **Progress Energy**
People. Performance. Excellence.

To grow your business in the Carolinas and Florida, call our Economic Development Team at 1.800.622.7562 or visit us at progress-energy.com/economic.