



Customization, flexibility buoy tech firm for 35 years

By MELINDA RIZZO
Special for Lehigh Valley Business

Innovation and relevance are key ingredients to a longtime Palmer Township firm's recipe for success.

For 35 years, Essent Corp. has succeeded despite fickle and evolving digital times. The company has weathered such market tsunamis as Sony Walkman players, IBM personal computers and, more recently, cloud-based computing services.

Essent has survived decades by paying attention to trends, tackling challenges, honoring employees and remaining optimistically flexible, regardless of the market.

"We talk about issues customers have, even if they don't know what their issues are," said Eric Alessi, Essent president and CEO.

In the highly competitive and fluid information technology industry, where nothing but change is a constant, Alessi said customization and flexibility have allowed the firm to flourish.

Today, Essent delivers software as cloud-based services to customers for business management, accounting, e-commerce and scheduling processes, and it helps customers



Clockwise from left, Essent Corp. developers Delbert Harry, Marjorie Cloak, Adam Taylor and Qian Weng discuss the latest Essent product offering, EssentOne, at company headquarters in Palmer Township.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

analyze their businesses practices to increase profitability.

"Thirty-five years ago, we stood out doing information management and solutions in the apparel industry," Alessi said. "In the early days, we [created] customer solutions over time and

delivered software in a very traditional way with consulting services."

KNOWLEDGE OF INDUSTRY, TECHNOLOGY

That philosophy – customization, flexibility and building solutions by listening to what cus-

ESSENT CORP.

- **What:** Technology solutions provider for business management, and ecommerce and systems integration.
- **Location:** William Penn Highway, Palmer Township.
- **No. of employees:** 29.
- **Website:** www.essent.com.

tomers really need – continues to differentiate Essent.

"Essent's knowledge of the industry and technology really sets them apart," said Eric Shonebarger, chief information officer of Hit Promotional Products in Largo, Fla. "This allows [Essent] to provide solutions that solve business problems with technology rather than simply throwing a solution together."

That custom made-to-order approach ensures a perfect fit and translates to speedier transactions and decreased cost of doing business for Hit Promotional Products, Shonebarger said.

As digital communications replace face-to-

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FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGY AND BUSINESS

Prevent audiovisual failures, preserve client happiness

By BRIAN VARANO

Special for Lehigh Valley Business

Many organizations today depend on audiovisual systems to communicate, collaborate and make important decisions.

AV software and hardware are used frequently for working on existing projects, brainstorming future initiatives and interacting with customers.



Varano

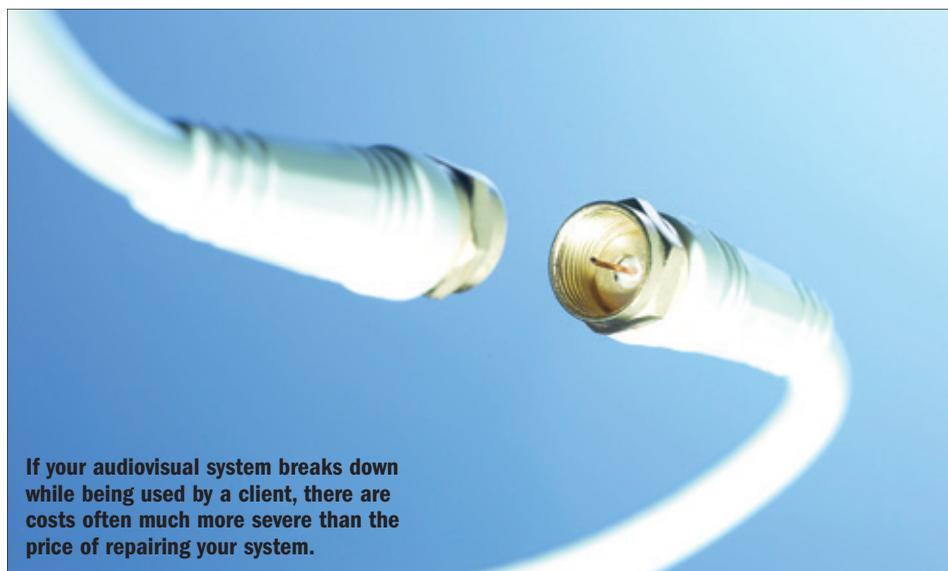
If something goes wrong with an AV system, it can cause internal and external problems. To help reduce AV costs, preventive maintenance is a much better solution than fixing something when it breaks.

Here are three reasons why preventive maintenance of AV systems is the less expensive way to go:

■ **Systems run better with preventive maintenance.**

AV systems are designed to work a particular way. Hardware and software updates, an important aspect of preventive maintenance, are integral to keep AV systems running the way that they should.

If you fail to keep up on your preventive maintenance, you may not experience any failures or outages, but it is likely that your audiovisual system will not run as well as it would if you had engaged in preventive maintenance.



If your audiovisual system breaks down while being used by a client, there are costs often much more severe than the price of repairing your system.

■ **Preventive maintenance is faster.**

When some part of your AV system goes down, there are several things that must happen before the problem can be addressed.

First, someone has to report the issue. Then, someone needs to create a support ticket or notify service personnel. Finally, the tech team spends time fixing the problem and ensuring it does not happen again.

The combined time for all of these events could be hours or, in worst cases, days.

Compare this to the time it takes a tech to install new software, align a lamp, adjust a wire

or keep your devices clean. There is no comparison.

The time difference between fixing a broken AV system and system maintenance is one of the main reasons why preventive maintenance is cheaper than fixing problems as they come up.

■ **The hidden cost of client-side issues.**

If a component of your AV system breaks down while being used by a client or while someone at your company is using it to help an existing or prospective client, there are costs that are difficult to document and often much

more severe than the price of repairing your system.

For example, think about the effect it would have if you were trying to land a high-value deal with a significant client, but while you were on a video call, your AV system went down and could not be immediately restored.

Not only would you lose that particular opportunity to close the deal, you also run the risk of negatively affecting the prospect's opinion of your organization.

This is an immeasurable risk that you cannot afford if you want to maximize revenues and make a good impression on existing and prospective clients.

Many businesses are worried about the cost of maintaining AV systems. While it is true that there are costs, it is important to think about the cost of your system going down.

Shorter fix times, better AV performance and making a better impression on customers all are reasons why preventive maintenance is cheaper than only doing maintenance when something breaks.

Brian Varano is director of marketing at Vistacom in Allentown. He has more than 20 years in wireless and information technology, management and marketing experience. He can be reached at bvarano@vistacominc.com or 610-791-9081.

ESSENT

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face or phone orders, Essent's business management tools provide Hit Promotional Products a better way to communicate with customers.

99-100 PERCENT ACCURACY

Joseph Fleming, president of Hub Pen Co. in Braintree, Mass., said exceptional turnaround time and accuracy of fulfillment for orders make Essent the top provider of business management solutions to his firm's clients.

"Essent provides our customers with pro-

grams to send their orders to Hub Pen quicker and cheaper, and with 99 to 100 percent order fulfillment accuracy," Fleming said.

He said previous suppliers often would have a 40- to 60-percent accuracy rate on orders.

According to Fleming, streamlining order processing makes his firm more efficient and saves money.

INNOVATION, SUPPORT FOR STAFF

Essent meets customers' needs with a culture fostering innovation, while it supports and celebrates staff.

"We are problem solvers, challenged in a professional way to come up with solutions for

our customers," Alessi said.

Because technology is "forever changing. You have to have a culture that is accepting of change," he said.

Providing an innovative work environment, where employees are encouraged to be creative and grow, helps sustain a long-term business culture, Alessi said.

IMPRESSIVE LONGEVITY

"Based on the nature of rapid growth in technology, a company in this field survives based on its ability to constantly evolve and offer new products to their customers," said Don Cunningham, president and CEO of

Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp.

Cunningham said Essent's staff represents a microcosm of the Valley's workforce.

"It also speaks to the strong economic assets of the Lehigh Valley, including a well-educated workforce with the talent and specific skills needed for the rapidly evolving advances of technology," he said.

New hires are carefully trained for the first six months of employment. Essent also provides employees with opportunities for career development, Alessi said.

"For a business to enjoy the kind of longevity that Essent Corp. has achieved is very impressive," Cunningham said.

EDWARDS

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SEEKING ACQUISITIONS

Fuentes rattled off a list of acquisitions, some of which didn't work out. The company got a foothold in the Lehigh Valley when it bought Victor Calculator in Allentown in 1976.

Fuentes said he hadn't thought about expanding to Virginia until he got a phone call about an opportunity there – a dealership in bad shape in Lynchburg. After acquiring Virginia Copiers in Richmond in 1993 – now Virginia Business Systems – the company has

five offices in the state.

It bought the Tamblin Co. in Avoca, near Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, in 2005. It opened a branch in Lewisburg this year.

Fuentes said he said he's looking for opportunities in Pottstown and Philadelphia suburban market.

SALES OF PRODUCTION PRINTERS

At one point, looking to expand west, Edwards bought what was left of a company in Ohio whose revenue had declined from \$15 million a year to \$2 million.

But another deal in Pittsburgh fell through, and Edwards decided to sell the Ohio business,

Fuentes said.

Now the company has six locations in Pennsylvania with about 100 employees, and five locations in Virginia with about 60 employees.

A highlight in 2014 was a lot of success selling production print equipment. Production printers – with quality good enough for brochures and direct mail – are becoming more affordable and easier to use, so many institutions and businesses are bringing them in-house.

THE RIGHT PERSON

Finding good employees is always a big

effort, Fuentes said. Because of the changes in the industry, customer relations have become more consultative than transactional, and that calls for salespeople and even technicians who have different skills, he said.

Bringing on the right people is the key business decision. Service people need a specific skill set, and most sales people have college degrees.

"It's difficult to find them," Fuentes said.

Edwards always has open positions. Fuentes said he's learned it is worse to settle than to wait for someone just right.

"Having the wrong person can be worse than not having someone," he said.

WHAT WERE YOU DOING... OFF THE CLOCK?



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Please send the photos as an attachment. Do not embed photos in Word documents.

Include thorough information, including the name, date and location of the event. Identify people from left to right.