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Nashua50: Making in-house corporate video work is trickier than you might think

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NASHUA – Teleconferencing is touted as the 21st-century answer to commuting. The same with smartboards and classroom blackboards as well as computerized energy management to wasting electricity.

But if those fancy gadgets aren't installed properly, you might as well be in the 19th century.

That complexity helps explain why Chris and Cheryl Gamst have turned a two-person company funded by the sale of their house while they were raising their two preschoolers, into a business with 21 employees and customers around the country.

"We've had IT people at very large companies tell us after an installation, 'I didn't know how complicated it is,'" said Chris Gamst, vice president of CCS Presentation systems.

"IT is not AV," said Cheryl Gamst, the company's president, using initialisms to describe information technology and audiovisual systems.

The husband-and-wife team have the New England license for CCS Presentations, an Arizona-based firm that sells, installs and services audiovisual equipment for companies, schools and government offices. They obtained the license – similar to a franchise, but the Gamsts say it gives them more freedom – in 1998 when they were in Massachusetts.

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Their first office in Chelmsford, Mass., was 400 square feet – smaller than many living rooms – and their “warehouse” was a closet. They have expanded in each of the four moves since, ending up in Nashua two years ago when seeking their own building after years of leasing.

They settled in an empty building at 132 Northeastern Blvd., rather than staying in Massachusetts partly because they live in Hudson and didn’t mind working in New Hampshire, partly because property is cheaper on this side of the border, and partly because officials with the state and city helped lure them.



“I told them, I thought you’d be dissatisfied that I didn’t have 100 employees, but they were happy to deal with us,” said Chris Gamst.

Massachusetts is so much bigger that it’s hard for a small company to get noticed, he said.

The couple also said they like operating in New Hampshire partly because, in a sentiment you won’t hear many people say, “state government is so efficient here.”

“Even getting a driver’s license is so much faster in New Hampshire than Massachusetts,” said Chris Gamst. “When I went to Merrimack (motor vehicles office) to get it renewed, so I timed it. ... I was in and out in eight minutes. It took an hour (in Massachusetts).”

Their current building covers about 26,000 square feet, of which they use half and lease out half, thereby paying less for the mortgage than they used to pay for rent. They also have room for their four vans and a box truck and storage of the various equipment they sell.



That includes gigantic flat-panel screens for corporate boardroom walls for videoconferencing, projectors and screens and cameras for training rooms, computerized electronic whiteboards for classrooms, and a new area of energy management electronics, to help buildings trim power use.

Although the privately held company doesn’t disclose sales figures, the Gamsts said about 40 percent of their office’s business involves companies, 40 percent schools – both public schools and colleges – and 20 percent government offices. They cover all of New England and have branched into New York state, and have done installations in other parts of the country as part of contracts with national companies.

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Their business originally involved mostly sales, but the relentless pace of technology has forced a change.

“In 1998, a projector sale price was \$6,000. Now it’s brighter, with more resolution, and costs maybe \$600 – one-tenth the price,” said Cheryl Gamst.

“You have to evolve; you can’t make the money on the hardware today,” said Chris Gamst.

Technology means equipment has more features, which means it’s more complicated to install and use, hence the switch to installation, service and training as a business model. One thing they haven’t done is get into the home theater business; they stick with commercial clients only.

As with many small companies, the Gamsts say the biggest bottleneck is employees, specifically finding trained audiovisual installers. The company does some training – the warehouse includes a pretend drop ceiling, to practice installing projectors and cabling – but there’s only so much it can do.

“We really need somebody who has done it already; that’s the hard part,” said Cheryl Gamst. Because they use components from up to 100 different manufacturers, ensuring that everything works together is also tricky.

Chris Gamst would like to see work-study projects that could train students while still in high school.

“Nobody teaches AV installation,” he lamented.

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