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Entrepreneur Profile — Toby Russell

By JAIMY LEE

SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

A San Diego native, Toby Russell started creating his client base years ago. He became friends with his future business partner, Dave Howell, in high school and the two eventually opened Velocity Audio Visual Services in 1999.

The full-service audiovisual company also provides lighting, audience response systems and video services to its clients. After seeing a need for this in Arizona, Velocity AVS opened its second office in Tempe in 2005.

"Most of our clients are local," Russell said. "And most of our clients are repeat customers, but we offer our service nationwide."

VITALS

Name: Toby Russell.

Title: Managing partner.

Company: Velocity Audio Visual Services.

Company address: 7054 Convoy Court, San Diego.

Company phone: (858) 279-2255.

Year founded: 1999.

Prior business experience: Sole proprietor of San Diego-based Eventavision Music & Video, which became part of Velocity AVS.

Average hours worked weekly: 60.

Source of startup capital: Personal finances.

2006 revenue: \$1.5 million.

2005 revenue: \$1 million.

Number of employees: Five.

Web site: www.velocityavs.com.

How I plan to grow business: Reinvestment into the business and equipment has always been the top priority for me. It lets me offer my customers the best equipment available and keeps me on the cutting edge of technology.

Now I'm at the point where I want to purchase and own a building in San Diego. It's another asset in the company, and it also shows we're a serious business and here to stay.

BACKGROUND

Birthplace: La Jolla.

Education: Mission Bay High School graduate

Age: 43.

Current residence: Bay Park.

Family: Wife, Yara; expecting a daughter in November.

Hobbies: Beach volleyball, landscaping, movies, good food.

JUDGMENT CALLS

Reason for getting into business: I knew I liked working for myself better than for someone else. It gave me the freedom to set my own hours and do what I believed was best for business.

How I plan to grow business: Reinvestment into the business and equipment has always been the top priority for me. It lets me offer my customers the best equipment available and keeps me on the cutting edge of technology. Now I'm at the point where I want to purchase and own a building in San Diego. It's another asset in the company, and it also shows we're a serious business and here to stay.

Biggest plus of business ownership: Being able to share my ideas with my clients and watch them grow.

Biggest drawback: You're on 24/7. No matter where you are or what you're doing, you're working.

Biggest business strength: Customer service. I know that sounds simple and so many people use the phrase "customer service." But you'd be surprised at how many new clients we get who come to us because they weren't satisfied with the level of customer service they were getting elsewhere.

Biggest business weakness: Keeping up with all the communications — voice mail, e-mail, text messaging, Web responses.

Biggest risk: Making large investments into new technology hoping to always be state of the art.

Smartest business decision: Partnering with Dave Howell to grow the business. Dave and I both worked in the industry in San Diego for years. We each had a solid client base and reputation for being good operators. By pooling our resources, we were able to build on that and expand our equipment and services.

Biggest business mistake: Trying to do too much myself. Falling behind as I learned how to effectively delegate to my employees.

Toughest career decision: Quitting the entertainment side of the business and moving from being a mobile disc jockey to being an audiovisual provider. There were so many unknowns at the time. But in the end, it was the right decision.

Biggest ongoing challenge: Finding the right employees! It's a small company and we need quality people with natural customer service skills.

The most important part of my business: Making sure clients are happy. Knowing them well enough to go the extra mile and give them what they need without them having to ask.

My business works best when: When everyone understands his job and is doing the job right.

Best way to stay competitive: Keeping up with what's happening in the industry. Going to trade shows, learning what's out there and what's up and coming.

How I measure success: Repeat clients and their referrals.

GOALS

Goals yet to be achieved: Having the right team of employees.

My five-year business plan: Own a building. Continue to grow our Arizona office. Open an office on the East Coast.

I would sell my business only if: I had to.

Guiding principle I will continue to follow: Knowing what your customers are thinking before they tell you.