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Through The Years

A Company's Evolution To High-Tech Provider

by Carolyn Heinze

There is no arguing that Smith Audio Visual has enjoyed a rich history. Founded in 1918 by Steve Smith, the company originally began as a Hall Brothers store—the precursor to Hallmark—and sold writing instruments. After a while, Smith added cameras to his inventory. In 1957, the company was officially incorporated as Smith Audio Visual.

"I believe the main reason he incorporated was because the A/V business started growing," said Larry Heilman, Smith Audio Visual's president and CEO, adding that the company did a lot of business with the government. "There was a huge increase in business."

In 1975, Heilman was hired to run the company's camera department. It wasn't long before he crossed over to the A/V division, which mainly serviced the education market. "When I first started, portable video cassettes had just been introduced to the market," Heilman said. "In a short time, we were doing broadcast work."

Today, Smith Audio Visual continues to service the education market, along with business and industry. "The difference between those markets is we don't have to sell so hard

to business and industry because if the system helps them communicate better, they'll buy it," Heilman said. "Videoconferencing is becoming more and more prevalent because of the speed of business. If they travel across the country to do face-to-face meetings with salespeople or

clients for 15 minutes or an hour, it takes two days. In many cases, you don't have to do that. You're in front of the customer [during a video-conference]. It speeds things up, because you can do it right now. You don't have to wait."

Smith Audio Visual operates out of one lo-



▲ Larry Heilman, on site at the new Lyon County Courthouse in Emporia, KS, where Smith Audio Visual equipped the courtrooms with technology to facilitate legal procedures and the presentation of evidence.

contractor profile



▲ Members of the Smith Audio Visual team (l-r): Linda Flanary, John Bredahl, Walt Bryant, Milton Gilliland, Larry Heilman, Ken Klamm, Daryl McLinn, Jim Leighton and Suzie Heilman. (Right) The Amerus Annuity Group boardroom in Topeka, KS.

cation in Topeka, and employs between 12 to 14 staff members, depending on the workload. When large projects are on the docket, the company hires part-time employees to pick up some of the extra work.

Heilman believes that the secret to managing his business' growth and maintaining stability during tough economic times is to be flexible. "It used to be that we'd just sell boxes, and our install base was very small," he said. "Now we are doing a lot more installation—that's the bulk of our business. Then, in turn, there are maintenance contractors and upgrades. You have a more defined role with your customers. With the downturn in business, we find that they cut their audiovisual people at the big corporations. At the hospitals, they have discontinued their audiovisual positions—they sub them out. If they have a big meeting, they will come to us and let us run the meeting for them. Historically [when there is corporate downsizing], our business goes way up."

The increasing complexity of A/V systems

requires systems contractors to work harder at making the equipment user-friendly, Heilman noted. "I look at it from a customer-usability perspective," he said. "They want to go in and be able to have things work—it's got to be simple. It's worth it just to add things so they can hit one button and something happens."

Other trades people, too, rely on systems contractors to make things simpler. "A lot of the general contractors and electrical contractors look at us as a supplier of engineering and installed goods," Heilman said. "We are definitely in an area that the architects can't keep up with. If they want to do a boardroom, somebody has got to call out the right-sized screen, the right projector, the right lens and the proper conduit space just to run all of these cables."

As the general public grows more accustomed to good sound and video, institutions that at one time didn't focus on high-tech systems are now upgrading their equipment. "Churches, for example, used to put up with

echo and all of those things for years," Heilman added. "They want to have the better quality that is being replicated in other areas now. They want to be able to hear and see better audio and video—everybody wants this, and they are upgrading their audio and video."

Smith Audio Visual prefers to offer both the design and installation of the systems it offers. "What we like to pride ourselves on is the fact that we are going to do the job right the first time," Heilman said. "From the start, we like to work with the customer to do the design work, and then we install the system. That way, we find out what their needs are, and we can tailor the system to better suit them."

▲ **Smith Audio Visual**
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