

TAKING ON THE GIANTS

Execulink is going head to head with Bell and Rogers in southwestern Ontario

BY PAUL KNOWLES

Ian Stevens' business card describes him as "President and CEO" of Execulink Telecom. But that's not how he describes himself. "I'm also the CTO," he says. "The Chief Tech Guy." For a business that is so dependent on being absolutely up to date in the technology department, that's a lot of responsibility. But Stevens welcomes it, specifically because it is so fundamental to his company.

He does everything possible to keep up to date. "I read a lot," he says. "There are industry events I attend every year. And I talk to people."

Talking to people may help him stay at the cutting edge of telecommunications technology, but asking people what they want from their communications company also won't hurt in Execulink's "David and Goliath" struggles with the telecom giants. It may be a battle, but so far, it is a fight in which they are succeeding. Today, Execulink has 50,000 customers, says Stevens. They've built that customer base up from... well, from two people, their client total 103 years ago.

Historic company

Execulink is a company with a long history. Today, it has offices located in several Ontario communities, including its biggest centre, on Victoria Street in Kitchener. But Stevens and his colleagues never forget their corporate roots.

He told Exchange that the company that was to grow to become Execulink began in the early years of the 20th century, when a country doctor arranged for a telephone line to be strung between the Oxford County communities of Burgessville and Holbrook. In 1904, Dr. Service connected his doctor's office to the general store, two miles away.

One year later, a group of local residents had banded together to donate lumber for poles, dig post-holes, and string wire. Any farmers who wanted to add their own telephone to the line had to build a personal spur line and connect it to the main circuit. The first switchboard was installed in the Burgess home in Burgessville in 1905.

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PHOTOGRAPH: EXCHANGE MAGAZINE

Ian Stevens, President and CEO of Execulink Telecom



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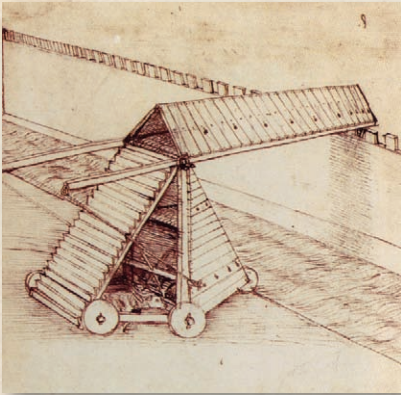
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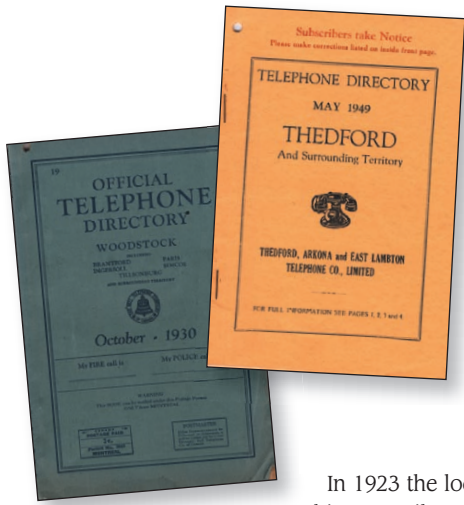
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"The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding." - Leonardo



In 1923 the local township council voted to establish a municipally owned telephone company, and the Burgessville Telephone Company became the North Norwich Municipal Telephone System.

In the 1940s, Stevens' great-grandfather became involved in a telephone business, and "he started buying little telephone companies," including the Burgessville system, and some in the Grand Bend area. Although Kitchener has more staff and space, the Burgessville office remains the official head office of Execulink.

The company has been known by sever-

al names, over the years. The North Norwich company merged with Hurontario Telephones Limited, becoming Hurontario Telecommunications Inc. in 1993. As telecommunications became more technically complex, so did the company. The organization got into the TV cable business. Also in 1993, Regional Cable Systems was purchased by Hurontario Telecommunications Inc, and its name was changed to Ausable Cablecom Inc.

In 1995 the company began offering Internet access using the domain name, oxford.net. But in 1998, the company purchased Execulink Internet Services Incorporated, a company based in Woodstock and London. Execulink Telecom's Internet customer base went from 3000 to 11000.

A year later, says Stevens, the company realized it had a significant branding problem as each division continued to function under its original name. A crucial decision was reached: the brand of choice was Execulink, and the other names were abandoned. With the brand clearly established – along with the succession plan, because Ian Stevens was now on board – Execulink focused on acquisitions, buying Internet Service Providers including MGL, Odyssey, Kitchener's Golden Triangle (in 2005), and several smaller com-



Keith Stevens, Chairman of the Board of Execulink.

panies. In all, says Stevens, "about nine companies have been acquired."

Family business

The company remains a family business. Stevens' father, Keith, became CEO in the 1970s, and remained as Chairman of the Board with Ian Stevens' appointment as President and CEO, a year ago.

Today, the Kitchener office handles sales, marketing, customer service and walk-in customer care. There is a London office, "where we have our servers, and have had

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for a long time,” says Stevens. There are also Execulink offices in the community where it all started, Burgessville, and in Thedford. The latter two house “legacy telecom offices,” because Execulink not only remembers its roots – it is still a player in its original business. Execulink is not alone here – there are still 22 independent telephone companies in Ontario.

Ironically current technology has also made everything old, new again. This com-

tal phone service and long distance services.

Privately owned

All of this has developed under private ownership. The Stevens family has been involved for more than six decades, and Ian Stevens says “there is a small group of shareholders, a couple of families, including ours.”

But while Execulink had been a family business for three generations prior to Ian’s involvement, there was no guarantee that

“We’re a technology company, absolutely. Our current and future products are very complex.”

pany that started supplying telephone service finds itself right back at that point – but in a whole new way. In this era of Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) and telecommunications deregulation, Execulink is competing head to head with the big boys like Bell and Rogers.

The company is offering internet service, of course – with lots of options from dial-up to high speed – and is now also offering voice services through newly launched digi-

record was going to stretch to a fourth generation, because, he says, “there was never a plan for me to come back here.”

Stevens is an engineering grad from the University of Waterloo. He says he was “not interested in telecom,” until he took a job at Nortel, where he “got the bug.”

During one of the acquisition phases of the business, while Ian was doing grad work in the United States, “My Dad said ‘Help’.” He came home, and has never

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looked back.

Stevens clearly enjoys the diversity of the company, from the “legacy telecom companies” offering hard-wired telephone services in small Ontario communities, to cable TV services in Ilderton and Forest, to the rapidly expanding internet service that serve a good chunk of southern Ontario, but “have capabilities of delivering access across Canada.”

And not just capabilities, he adds. “We are doing it.” They are extending their reach through synergies with other companies in other parts of Canada, he adds.

Key to expansion is voice service. The market for telephone services is opening up – which Stevens admits can be a two-edged sword, as competition heats up.

Deregulation for local phone service has been welcomed by Bell – which must signal a warning for smaller players like Execulink. When the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) announced deregulation, earlier this year, Bell officially welcomed the greater freedom to compete, and to develop new offers for consumers in dozens of communities across Ontario and Quebec. The CRTC ruled that, for the first time ever, prices for residential local phone services

provided by Bell will no longer be regulated in many cities and communities in both provinces.

Kevin Crull, President of Residential Services for Bell, said, “Consumers are the big winners. Competition in the local phone market is going to heat up, and consumers can look forward to new and innovative service offerings becoming available from Bell in the near future. We now have greater flexibility to develop new offers that

Stevens says that to date, he has not seen a change in Bell’s approach – but he believes one is coming. He noted, though, that Execulink has also been competing with Rogers, which has never been under the same CRTC regulations for phone service.

Stevens contends that his company’s long-standing telecom experience gives them an enormous advantage – “this allows us to deliver what we’ve done traditionally to a wider customer base.”

Stevens moves around constantly to keep in touch – an intriguing trait in a man who is a leading expert on cyber-contact.

provide value for our customers. Bell will be even better able to compete with non-regulated cable firms and other service providers, and that means more choices will be available in the marketplace.”

But at Execulink, it’s full speed ahead. “We are bringing voice to customers in Bell territories,” says the CEO, “in London, Kitchener and Woodstock.” Execulink has been named a Competitive Local Exchange Carrier in those centres, which allows them to compete with Bell.

And he becomes thoughtful for a moment, reflecting on the “huge challenge” involved in taking on Bell and Rogers... and then concluding that “we exist because our customers trust us.”

Telecommunications companies cannot afford to rest on their success for even a moment. Their world is defined by change and technological advances. Stevens says that he has to constantly be looking to “next generation technology”, aware of technological potential, and the services –

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“We’re a technology company, absolutely. Our current and future products are very complex.” But the complexity has a pattern across their products: “For us, it dovetails very well together.”

The human touch

Execulink has a staff of 110, at the four offices, with 50 of them in Kitchener. Stevens seldom spends more than a day or two at any one of the sites, moving around

Stevens takes pride in pointing out that Execulink’s call centre is located in Kitchener, offering 24/7 tech support; he pledges never to outsource customer service. “I reject the thought of outsourcing,” he says, arguing that relying on another party to deal with your customers is bad for the customer, and for the company. “For us, it’s all about making sure, making it easy for a customer who just wants it to work.”

Early adapters

Execulink has a national vision, but

eager for the newest thing in cyberspace. Execulink has both; the early adapters are currently leading the way in accessing digital phone service.

Stevens says that, four to five months into offering internet phone service, the early adapters are already in, and now “people are making a decision to switch to our product,” especially businesses who are satisfied Execulink customers.

He admits that the switching is not all in their direction – it’s a volatile marketing, and Execulink fights hard to retain customers.

Exchange asked Stevens about the biggest challenges his company faces. He first mentioned “the deep pockets of Bell and Rogers.” He is competing with giants, and he knows it.

He also points to the need for recruitment of top staff. “We need more people. Getting that talent in a market where a lot of people are looking for that talent” is a significant challenge.

Stevens says that Execulink knows its base: southwestern Ontario. “We’re focused on the Kitchener-Waterloo and London markets,” he says. “We want to keep building out. Small and medium-sized business is where our sweet spot is. We want to keep on serving their needs.” X

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constantly to keep in touch – an intriguing trait in a man who is a leading expert on cyber-contact.

But he knows that whatever technology is available, there is no substitute for human contact. That is reflected in how his company is structured. He quotes with pride from emails from clients who make comments like, “I know when I call, that you guys are going to help me,” and “you’re going to pick up the phone when I call.”

Stevens also recognizes the challenges of marketing. “We focus on Southwestern Ontario,” he says, and despite the potential for internet advertising at their fingertips, he acknowledges the old truism: “Our number one way to get new customers is word of mouth.”

There are two kinds of telecommunications customers – those who hear good things about a company, and come on board, and those who are “early adapters,”



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DEER RIDGE CENTRE A PRIME EXAMPLE OF DEVELOPMENT NEAR KITCHENER'S 401 ACCESS



The name Lulu's lived on long after the night club closed. Today the property has been revitalized as Deer Ridge Centre.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF DEER RIDGE CENTRE

It was a name with iconic resonance: Lulu's, home of the world's longest bar, site of some of the greatest concerts ever staged in Waterloo Region, and the spark point for hundreds of romantic relationships.

Lulu's has existed nowhere but in warm memories for many years; it came to the end of its first incarnation in 1992, and closed for good in 2000.

But now, a dynamic new development has risen on the former Lulu's property – an office, hospitality and retail/service complex that will cover 250,000 square feet of enclosed space, plus parking for 1,000 vehicles. The site covers more than 21 acres. And speaking of “iconic” names, the project has been brought to reality by the long-time manager of the Magna International real estate and construction department, Heri Polzl.

Polzl left Magna on good terms in 1999, and since then has been focused exclusively on his development company, which today has one million square feet of buildings in Waterloo Region.

The Lulu's property – officially known as Deer Ridge Centre, and located at King and Deer Ridge – is perhaps the most ambitious Polzl project to date. Not only is it a major development, but it is also leading a trend that is seeing the section of Kitchener near the 401 undergo significant growth. In 2006, after a successful start, and at midpoint of the development project, Polzl brought in partner Peter Schwartz and formed Laurence Polzl LP.

The Deer Ridge Centre is a multi-faceted development which upon completion will include 12 separate buildings. Its initial occupant was the familiar furniture retailer The Brick; Polzl has expanded that building so the Kitchener Brick is now the largest store in the chain in Canada.

That was just the beginning. The famous Lulu's building was completely renovated into office space, split into two sections with an attractive courtyard in the centre. The first occupant was World Access, now joined by the governmental Municipal Property

SPORTSWORLD CROSSING UNVEILED

Early October saw the unveiling of what was described as “the City of Kitchener’s largest private-sector, real estate development – Sportsworld Crossing.” This rebirth of the former Sportsworld site is slated to be a \$100 million retail, office, recreational and hotel development.

In November 2005, Sportsworld was purchased by GPM Managed Investments, a Canadian real estate investment company. GPM is a member of the Integrated Asset Management group of companies, a Canadian alternative asset manager with operating companies that offer private equity, private debt, real estate and managed future solutions to institutional investors. IAM has more than \$3 billion in assets and committed capital under management.

GPM has retained Intermarket Inc, a Toronto-based real estate firm, to develop the Sportsworld Crossing project. A statement says, “Intermarket specializes in land, retail and office development and focuses on high quality, sustainable projects.”

In October, it was announced that the project will be one of the first commercial developments built upon the principles of Ontario’s “Place to Grow” legislation.

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Since then, a thriving Tim Hortons has opened near King Street, retail outlets including a prepared food store, a pizza store, a flower shop, an insurance office and a spa have occupied a retail/service building, and a 45,000 square foot office building is nearing completion. The development company retains ownership of all buildings on the site

Plans are also underway for more food services – a Cheesecake Café and a Turtle Jack’s Muskoka Grill have both staked their claims on the site.

Heri Polzl says he was somewhat surprised at the interest shown by food and service outlets. But the veteran developer and civil engineer holds to a unique business philosophy – he believes that “every property finds its own best use.”

Perhaps it is not a surprise, after all, that the Deer Ridge Centre is proving popular with office tenants and food and service enterprises. Even though this particular property – like the transforming Sportsworld properties across King Street – has been laying fallow for a few years, it sits beside an increasingly busy thoroughfare.

Heri’s son, Mike Polzl, is Director of Real Estate Services at Deer Ridge Centre

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(as part of a true family enterprise – Heri’s wife, Heidi Polzl, owns Primus Realty, the Polzl’s in-house broker). Mike Polzl points out that an astonishing 36,000 cars a day travel along King Street – including all cars heading for west-bound 401. About 40,000 people live or work within three miles of the Deer Ridge site. “This is a real hub,” he says.

The Deer Ridge Centre development set some key standards for the city of Kitchener. This was the first site that was required to develop, not only a site plan, but a master plan – an approved design indicating all vehicle and pedestrian flow through the site. It has resulted in a well-landscaped and carefully thought-through “campus”.

What is next at Deer Ridge? Before the end of the year, construction of the two restaurants and a second “twin” retail/service building will have begun. The just-completed office building is already nearly full, and another, 30,000 square foot office building is in the works.

Heri Polzl says he is working hard to attract a grocery store client, to meet often-expressed needs of the the local Deer Ridge community, as well as the hundreds who work in the office build-



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DEER RIDGE CENTRE

Deer Ridge Centre, top, is approximately half-way through its multi-phased development plan.

ings. In general, he says, “This whole area is underdeveloped. We are trying to fill that niche.”

An important part of the development is installing traffic lights, because Deer Ridge Centre will be directly linked by

road to the Sportsworld property. Heri Polzl says, “with the development across the street, this will really be a first-class shopping node for the whole region.” He adds, “Geographically, we are the centre of the region.” X

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