

From *The Pilot*, 5/3/09

'Under Radar': Kiosk Company Taking Off

By: John Krahnert III, Staff Writer

If you've left your house in the past 10 years, you've probably encountered an automated kiosk at some point.

They spit out your boarding pass at the airport. They can check you out at a supermarket. You can shop on them. You can register for classes at college. The applications are endless.

Even if you're familiar with these machines, you probably don't know that an industry-leading kiosk manufacturer is located right here in Moore County.

Meridian Kiosks, headquartered on South Pine Street in Aberdeen, has produced thousands of kiosks in its 10-year history. Its 65,000-square-foot facility oversees production of the machines from sheet metal to the finished product.

Meridian founder and CEO Chris Gilder started the company in late 1999 with just three employees, after doing some research and acting with due diligence.

"I thought there was going to be a big opening in this industry," he said. "We've done kiosks for just about every kind of application."

Gilder's vision was to create a company that did its own manufacturing and engineering, a goal that took about seven years to achieve. Meridian bought its Aberdeen facility about four years ago, after being headquartered in Southern Pines and Pinehurst.

Recently, the company completed the purchase of a Canadian competitor, KING Products and Solutions, Inc., which does kiosk application software development. KING had been in business since 1944 and broke into the kiosk industry in the early 1990s, manufacturing one of the first kiosks that is still working today.

The deal also expanded Meridian's sales team, led by Robert Giblett, who happened to be KING's vice president of sales and marketing from 2003 to 2006. Giblett was actually on board before the acquisition, and his familiarity with the company proved helpful, Gilder said.

"[KING] has a great software platform, with some really nice hardware designs," Giblett said. "So that's why when we looked at the company, it was a great fit. "

Giblett estimated that the two companies have produced more than 30,000 kiosks worldwide combined.

Meridian will continue to operate the Canadian office to house its software development team and service and support contracts.

The marriage of KING and Meridian brings a unique software and hardware combination, allowing for every aspect of the production to take place in house, or from "concept to completion," Meridian's motto.

"What we've really done," Gilder said, "is taken what I always considered one of the best software providers in the industry and obviously I consider ourselves as one of the premier hardware suppliers in the industry, and now have joined the two together, so we have a true end-to-end solution that we control every aspect of -- from manufacturing the hardware, to developing the software."

"And that's very unique," Giblett added. "We're probably the only company in the industry that does the complete package."

Meridian has thousands of customers all over the world, covering a broad base of industries, including major corporations such as Walmart/Sam's Club, Hewlett-Packard and IHG, which operates the Holiday Inn chain. Gilder said that customer base continues to grow at a "rapid rate."

With the KING acquisition complete, the Meridian team thinks the company is now ready to expand.

Meridian has essentially flown "under the radar," as Gilder put it, for its nine years of existence, doing no marketing of any kind.

The company has experienced strong "organic" growth, but about a year ago, Gilder and Chief Financial Officer Gerhard Renner decided that the company was past its nascency stage, and it was time to make a really concerted effort to grow the company -- building out engineering, manufacturing capabilities and sales.

"We're really starting to form what I see is the best team to move forward with our company and really start marketing our capabilities," Gilder said. "Even the people locally don't know we exist here. We have certainly good recognition within the industry, but it's not a huge industry so we want to start getting more recognition outside of it."

A native of the United Kingdom, Gilder stumbled upon the Sandhills while visiting friends in Fayetteville. He said that driving around the Pinehurst Traffic Circle gave him fond memories of roundabouts back home, and he fell in love with the area. He said Meridian is committed to Moore County, a big factor in acquiring the Aberdeen facility.

"That was a real decision-maker for us," he said. "I wanted to keep the company in Moore County, because I love living here. It's a great area and this building really fit our needs, so we're excited to keep it here in Moore County and live in an area that we love."

The future looks bright for the Aberdeen company. Meridian is looking to expand outside of the United States, eyeing opportunities in Africa and Europe, including a potential new facility in the U.K.

It is also in the process of developing some exciting new kiosk concepts, including a driver's license renewal system for DMVs and a passport kiosk that snaps your picture, takes all of your information and submits it in one stop.

Gilder said, "It's certainly a dynamic industry that we're in."