

Good deed becomes successful business

By **LaTina Emerson** | *Staff Writer*

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Phil Alexander is living proof that good deeds can pay off.

Thirteen years ago, while coaching his children's soccer team, he found himself spending hours calling parents to notify them of changes in the practice schedule.

So Mr. Alexander, a mechanical engineer by training, decided to put his skills to work.

He designed an automated voice messaging system that, with the touch of a button, allowed him to call each person on a list and leave the same pre-recorded message. When others learned about the idea, they started lining up to use the service to reduce their own calling time.

Mr. Alexander donated the service at no charge and soon was running two dozen telephone lines out of his home. His good deed was becoming rather expensive, so to help the service pay for itself, he took a leap of faith and decided to go into business.

Today, Mr. Alexander is the chief executive officer of CallingPost Communications Inc. in Augusta, which provides automated voice messaging services to clients nationwide. The office on Blackburn Road has more than 40,000 customers, from churches and volunteer organizations to large businesses.

"It was amazing how quickly it grew. Nobody else was doing this back then. I know the Lord gave me that idea," Mr. Alexander said.

This month, the philanthropist-turned-entrepreneur is taking his service to Canada and will expand to Hawaii and Puerto Rico later in the year. After that, he's tackling the rest of globe.

Though similar businesses have duplicated his services over the years, Mr. Alexander says that he was the first to innovate the technology.

"We get e-mails, letters and calls from people all the time saying this is the greatest thing since sliced bread. They just love it because it saves them so much time on the phone," Mr. Alexander said. "The people who get the calls like it because they get information that they wouldn't have gotten otherwise. When people see CallingPost show up on their Caller ID, they usually know that it's a message they want."

Despite his success, Mr. Alexander has never lost sight of his original mission -- to help people. His office is evidence of his civic-minded values. As a member of the Optimist Club, he has the Optimist Creed hanging on the wall.

On a bookshelf below sits a miniature framed oil painting of a Western Meadowlark, a gift for changing an elderly woman's flat tire during rush hour traffic. In gratitude, she painted the picture and mailed it with a handwritten note.

"He's a super guy with a great love for people," said Jimmy Harper, a close friend and fellow member of Gideons International, a nondenominational Christian organization that donates Bibles to hotels, hospitals and jails.

He said that Mr. Alexander is a "family man" and "a great man of faith."

"For the organizations that he's a part of, he gives his very best. He's a great civic leader in the Augusta area."

Derek Dugan, the Kroc Center coordinator for the Salvation Army, said Mr. Alexander donates his company's services to many volunteer organizations, including his own.

Mr. Alexander is also a member of the Salvation Army's advisory board.

"During board meetings, when we're asking someone to attend an event on the Salvation Army's behalf, he's always the first one to raise his hand," Mr. Dugan said. "Phil is somebody that I always have to go up to and say, 'Please tell me if I'm asking you to do too much.'"

His reply is, 'I will tell you. Keep asking.' "

Mechanical mind

Mr. Alexander, the fourth of five children by Winfred and Josephine Alexander, was born and raised in Muscle Shoals, Ala.

He said his entrepreneur parents -- his father owned a carpentry business and his mother was a seamstress -- worked hard to teach them the values of hard work and independence.

"They had a really good work ethic," said Mr. Alexander, who considers his parents an inspiration for his own entrepreneurship.

His father, who died a year and a half ago, was a sought-after builder who "had more people wanting him to build (houses) than he could build."

"My brother and I were most of the labor," he said. "In those days, we did everything from digging the foundation to doing the plumbing and wiring. You did it all back then."

"My mom, when we were growing up, she made all of our clothes, and she sewed for other people. She was quite an entrepreneur," he said.

Mr. Alexander developed a love for technical work during his childhood. He spent many afternoons in his brothers' shop in their backyard.

"My older brothers were kind of hot rod mechanics. They raced cars, and I grew up in a shop working on cars," Mr. Alexander said.

He built his first go-kart when he was 9. He welded the frame himself and used a motorcycle engine so that it would have more speed.

"That's the kind of background I had," he said. "Always trying to figure out how to take things apart and see how they work -- and hopefully getting them back together."

Years later, Mr. Alexander entered college at the University of Alabama, and he knew the path that he wanted to follow. He majored in mechanical engineering, and when he graduated in 1980, he was offered a job with Southern Co. in Birmingham.

During college, he married his high school sweetheart, Kathy, in 1978. His father-in-law insisted that his daughter attend one year of college before getting married, and the young couple obeyed his wishes.

Mrs. Alexander completed her studies with a degree in accounting, and today works alongside her husband as an accountant/owner at CallingPost.

In 1982, Mr. Alexander received an assignment to work as a field engineer in Augusta while Plant Vogtle was under construction.

After completing the project, he decided to stay, and he was promoted several times, becoming the plant's project engineer.

While he was successful, he said he was dissatisfied with the frequent traveling that his job required.

Around this time, Mr. Alexander was coaching his children's soccer team and developed the idea for his automated voice messaging.

He used his experience writing the first automated attendant program at Plant Vogtle to create the messaging service.

"That's how CallingPost got started. It was totally free, and I didn't envision it becoming a business," Mr. Alexander said. "I did it for myself, and then a lot of my friends asked me if they could use it."

"When we started out, it was mainly volunteer organizations -- churches, sports organizations, Little League groups and Boy and Girl Scout troops. Before I knew it, there were a bunch of people using it, and I had gone from one phone line in my home office to 24 phone lines in a short period of time."

Mr. Alexander continued to operate from his home, but he realized that he needed to find sponsors to keep the service running. He said he received support from businesses including Wal-Mart and Regions Bank.

In 1996, he was able to hire a programmer, and he realized that he'd come up with a pretty good idea, one that was worthy of a business.

That same year, he followed in his parents' entrepreneurial footsteps and decided to leave his engineering job to pursue CallingPost Communications full-time. He moved into an incubator space with several other start-up businesses in downtown Augusta.

He remained in the space for six to eight months before moving into his current location on Blackburn Drive.

Stroke of genius

Although Mr. Alexander had the support of sponsors, he also sought the assistance of investors in the early stages of his business, he said.

He realized the sponsorship model would no longer work as the company began offering nationwide service in 2001.

"That model didn't work because I didn't know anyone who lived in those cities. Locally, you can get sponsors, but nationally, that's harder to do," he said.

In order to expand, the business had to start charging for service.

"We charged a whopping five cents per call. So, if you had to call 10 people, that would cost you basically 50 cents," he said.

Initially, Mr. Alexander tried to expand to individual cities -- such as Atlanta, Charlotte, N.C., and Birmingham, Ala. But he realized that it was best to simply offer the services nationwide.

The company's staff of 12 designs and manages all software and equipment in Augusta. However, to access remote locations, CallingPost rents space at telephone companies and places equipment in key locations across the country, right now as far west as Oklahoma City.

"Most of our call volume comes out of telephone companies," Mr. Alexander said. "We hook all of our systems up to the phone companies' networks. It's a lot more secure than what we could do here."

In 2001, CallingPost Communications Inc. added Internet access for its customers. Previously, customers had to enter all phone numbers via the telephone to set up their group.

With Internet access, clients can input their data more easily, import telephone numbers from a spreadsheet and even manage their call group by tracking whether people received the message.

The new technology also gave customers the option to record their messages with a microphone connected to the Internet. However, most people prefer, even today, to record messages "the old-fashioned way" with the telephone, he said.

Today, the business has three pricing levels: five cents, 7 1/2 cents and 10 cents. Messages can last from 30 seconds to 60 seconds, which "forces the person leaving the message to get to the point."

"What we've found is that most people are very happy -- even at 10 cents to call 15 people -- to pay \$1.50, record one message and not have to worry about it after that."

Word of mouth

CallingPost gets most of its customers through clients who are pleased with their experience and want to share the service with others, Mr. Alexander said.

He was recently named Entrepreneur of the Year by the Columbia County Chamber of Commerce.

The road to success was "rocky, rough and challenging," he said.

The biggest hurdle was converting from a free service to a paid service.

"That was probably the most difficult thing, and once we did it, it really took off. Literally tens and hundreds of thousands of people now get the benefit of the system," he said.

Mr. Alexander said he works hard to maintain the business, but things are somewhat easier now.

"For my wife and me both, it was nothing for us to put in 70 hours per week, Saturday was a regular work day," Mr. Alexander said. "Most of the time, I would start working at 5 or 5:30 a.m. We would stay in the office until about 8 or 9 p.m. every night, except Sunday."

He said that he still works late, but he's more reasonable about the time he commits to the business.

Larry Douglas, a customer service manager at CallingPost, has worked as an engineer for 25 years.

He joined the company last year because he was impressed with what he saw. He considers his boss to be "fair, level-headed and quite analytical."

In addition, he said the business has a "silent impact."

"It's very subdued, but we make a difference. There's no doubt about it," Mr. Douglas said.

Jim Tingen, who works in sales and marketing at CallingPost, knows Mr. Alexander through their church, Abilene Baptist Church, and the Martinez-Evans Optimist Club.

He said Mr. Alexander is "upfront and honest" and works to ensure that his employees are successful.

"To me, it's a great place to work. He's a great manager and a great entrepreneur. He doesn't hover over you; he pretty much lets you run with it," Mr. Tingen said. "He does everything he can to keep us moving in the right direction."

Mr. Alexander also promotes a Christian atmosphere at the business. It's not uncommon for meetings to start with a devotion or prayer, he added.

"He constantly gives God the credit for any success that the company has. I've never been in a company that quite had an emphasis that way. But I think it's good, and he just tries to do what's right," Mr. Tingen said.

"I think that he's a great guy. He's the kind of person that you're proud to call your friend."

New frontier

While some competitors remain, Mr. Alexander said his company is unique because of its focus on customer service.

"I've seen probably close to a dozen companies that have popped up, copying what we do. They're no longer here," he said. "We really care about people, and we try to help them. It's our mission."

Because the industry is relatively uncharted, Mr. Alexander is working with legislators to develop regulations.

"When we invented this in 1995, nobody else was doing it. Back then, there was no need for any regulation because we always did what was right," he said.

"But nowadays, as the technology has become easier and more accessible to other people, there's a tendency by some to misuse it."

For example, some companies are permitting "unwanted telemarketing calls or spam."

"We're totally against that, of course. We actually work with the GBI, FBI and other authorities to keep out people who would misuse it."

In the community

When Mr. Alexander isn't at work, he can usually be found volunteering in the community.

"Community service to me is almost kind of an invisible backbone in our country," he said. "Everybody has their jobs, but it's volunteerism that really bonds things together."

"If more people were to get involved in community service, I think it would make people more appreciative of what they have and want to help people more."

He said the Salvation Army is "where the rubber meets the road."

"You get to see people change their lives. People who are on the streets become productive members of society," he said.

In April, he said, the organization's emergency shelter provided more than 4,000 meals and 2,000 nights of lodging in Augusta. Also, more than 3,000 clothing items were distributed.

Mr. Dugan said that Mr. Alexander, who serves as the Salvation Army's program chairman, oversees its Kettle Campaign, which provides toys for thousands of families each year.

"He puts a lot of thought and dedication into everything he does," Mr. Dugan said. "There's people who like to command, and there's people who like to support.

"He likes to support."

Mr. Tingen said Mr. Alexander actively promotes the Optimist Club's mission to help local youth.

"He's looking to do whatever he can in the community, especially for young kids," Mr. Tingen said.

Scott Godefroy, who met Mr. Alexander through the Georgia Society of Professional Engineers, said that his friend encouraged him to join the local Optimist Club.

"He's a man with a big heart, a good fella," Mr. Godefroy said. "I think he's done well, and he deserves all the best."

Mr. Alexander said operating his company has "been an amazing ride."

"We've been very blessed as a company, and we continue to grow," he said.

"It's not that we haven't had our bumps and challenges along the way, but most of those were for us to learn more and prepare for future growth."

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PHIL ALEXANDER

TITLE: CEO and Chairman, CallingPost Communications Inc.

BORN: Dec. 1, 1956; Muscle Shoals, Ala.

EDUCATION: University of Alabama, bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering

FAMILY: Wife, Kathy; children, Maegan and Nicholas

EXTRACURRICULAR/CIVIC: The Salvation Army, advisory board member, chairman of the program committee; Gideons International, chairman; Martinez-Evans Optimist Club, past officer; Columbia County Chamber of Commerce, member and recipient of 2008 Entrepreneur of the Year; Georgia Society of Professional Engineers

HOBBIES: Golf, tennis and community service

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