

'A proactive approach': IT firm stresses customer service, grows in economic downturn



WEST COBB — Many small businesses face the same issues as large corporations when it comes to computer and IT problems. But unlike the big businesses, those with small staffs and small budgets often cannot afford to have a department of full-time technical support personnel in the next room.

That's when Marietta resident Mike Grier's west Cobb company, Southeastern Computer Associates, comes to the rescue.

"With Mike and his company, there's a trust level," said Malinda Harris, administrative coordinator of Woodstock's In-Line Consulting. Harris said she has been a client of Grier's for almost eight years. "They treat your money like it's their money, and it's such an important thing, especially in this economy. You can spend so much money in IT without having that trust level that you're getting the best advice and the best direction, and you definitely get that with Mike.

"And I also like him as a person. He is very cool and methodical and calm, which is important if something goes wrong. Having him and his company is critical — absolutely critical."

Grier said his company provides server installation, maintenance and support; network installation, maintenance and support; and technology planning, which he said is often opposite from what his competitors offer.

“Usually, it’s a break/fix approach IT companies take — you break it, we’ll fix it. Just call us when you need us,” Grier said. “We would prefer to have an audit, see what you have in place, where you want to go with your business and how I can provide you with the technology to get there. So it’s more of audit, plan, do — it’s more of a proactive approach.”

Grier started his company back in September 1995 out of his home, as mainly a one-man show. Grier said it took him about a year of working on his own to get him back to the salary level he was making as a corporate IT manager. Luckily, his wife, Laura, was able to support his initiatives and their two children until he reached that level.

Venturing out on his own was not an easy decision, he said, but he knew companies were looking for someone quick, responsive and trustworthy, and he felt he could offer those traits to eager companies.

“Two things really caused me to start a business: No. 1 was the lack of service we were receiving at my old company from IT providers. The server would go down on Monday, they’d call back on Tuesday and come out on Wednesday. That was ridiculously slow, and when you’re dealing with computer systems that can be so important to a company, you have to be faster than that.

“The second was when my wife’s company called me to help them with a computer problem. It was very simple, but they were so appreciative that someone would come and help them, and that just became a key factor. A light went on, and I thought, ‘I’ve found what I want to be when I grow up,’” Grier said with a laugh.

Grier’s company now has 15 employees and has done something most companies have not during the recession — grown. He credits this to the personalized and quick approach he and his employees take with their clients.

“I remember what the service level on ‘Main Street’ was like, as opposed to the service level at a big-box retailer,” said Grier, 52. “It was indeed personal. As an example of our personalized approach, our clients don’t call a central dispatch number and get the next available person. Instead, they place a call directly to the network engineer they work with on a regular basis who already knows them and their systems. We’re a technology company, but technology is not what this is truly about. It’s about real, everyday human relationships.”