

Literally • Carving



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With a penchant for building custom cabinets, personalized service outranks revenue growth among Media Rooms Inc.'s goals.

BY ERIN HARRINGTON,

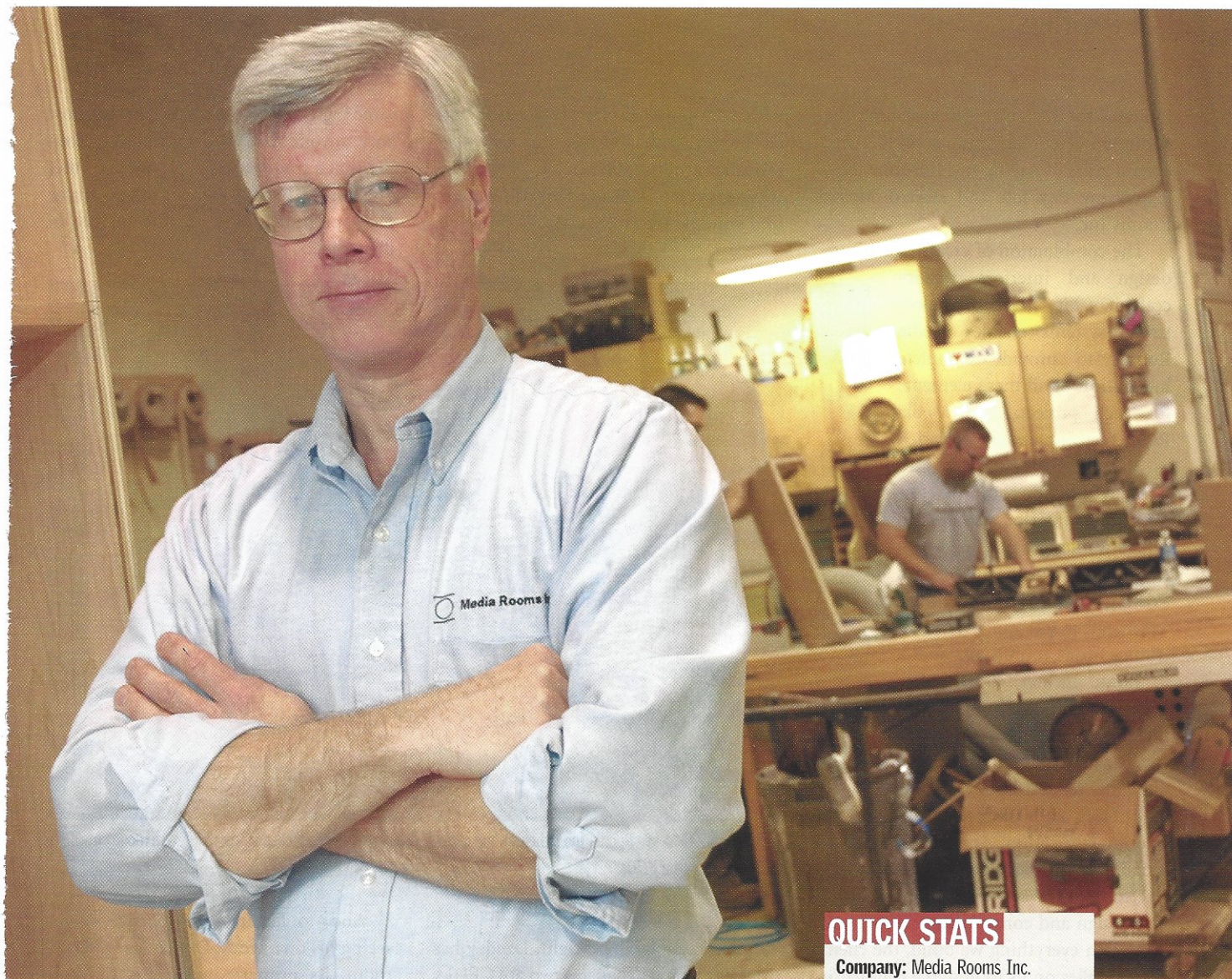
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFERSON STEELE

About 20 percent of Media Rooms Inc.'s installations are cabinet design and construction only. Meanwhile, many of its other installations include custom-built cabinets to complement custom systems, says CEO Rob Dzedzy (right).

Why mess with a good thing? Sometimes the status quo is exactly where you want to be. Since founding Media Rooms Inc. in 1983, Rob Dzedzy has enjoyed steady growth. The core business—automation, integration and high-end home theaters—delivered \$1.4 million last year. While some integrators seek to skyrocket revenues, Dzedzy has struck a nice niche by *controlling* his.

He leans to the side of many integrators who feel that if you go after a significant growth spurt, and really try to take the business to another level, you can lose a lot in the transition—not the least of which is profit. Often, during the first year when you hire more staff to facilitate that growth, you can expect to eliminate half your profit, and a lot of your control along with it.

"When you have a one- to two-million dollar company, you run the business," Dzedzy contends. "When your business gets larger, then you run the people who run the business. I would like Media Rooms to be a multimillion dollar business, but I am not sure I want to relinquish control of the



business I started. Expanding requires capitalization. I don't want to be in a position where I am concentrating more on keeping the investors happy than keeping my clients happy."

Media Rooms has certainly met its goal of providing clients with a one-stop resource for a complete electronic environment, from the room décor and furnishings to the electronic components. Dzedzy's West Chester, Pa.-based company offers a full scope of services, spanning home automation/systems integration, theater interiors, whole house audio and lighting control. But what truly distinguishes Media Rooms is that it not only provides and installs all types of electronic equipment, it also designs and builds custom furniture in

an in-house woodshop to meet the specific needs of each client. No other custom audio/video companies, Dzedzy says, offer all of these services on-site.

An 'A' in Woodshop

The entrepreneur has the woodworking edge, as he began designing and installing audio/video systems in conjunction with building custom furniture in the 1970s. "I started building furniture for myself and built my first 'media cabinet' in the early 1970s," says Dzedzy. "One thing led to another and I started building media cabinets for other people. I had a full-time job as a graphic designer managing a 20-person art department, so I built furniture in the evenings. That soon led not just to

QUICK STATS

Company: Media Rooms Inc.

Location: West Chester, Pa.

Web site: www.mediaroomsinc.com

Principal: Rob Dzedzy, CEO

Years in Business: 23 years

Number of Employees: 10

Total Revenues: Not disclosed (private company)

Specialties: Turnkey installations; audio/video systems, custom-built cabinets and theater interiors.

FYI: Customer service is crucial. We want all of our clients to be lifetime clients.

building the furniture but installing the audio/video component, as well. After several years of having two full-time jobs, I quit my day job and started Media Rooms Inc."

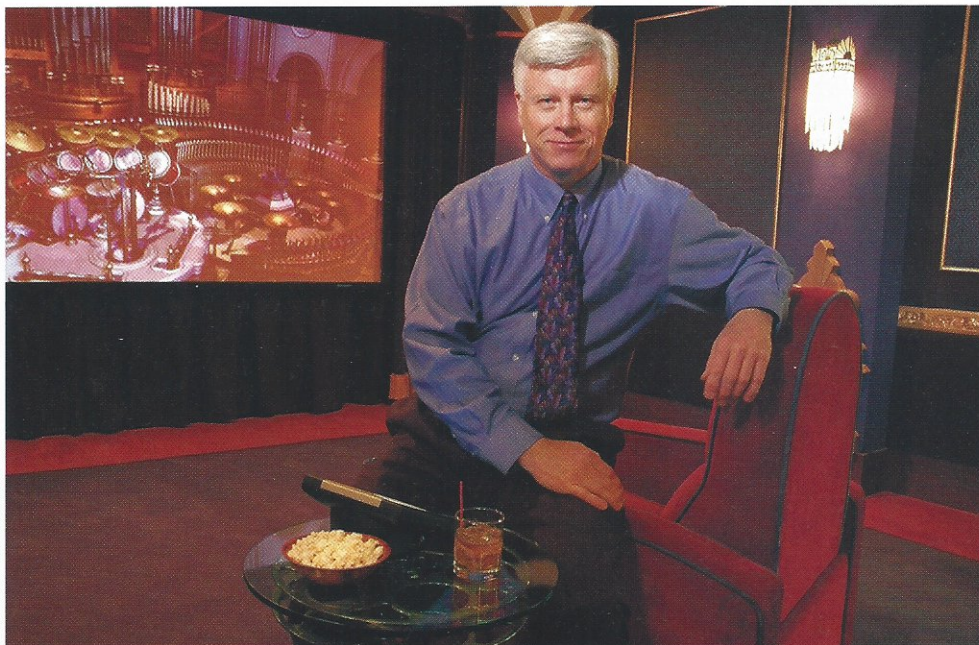
The combination of creative furniture design and interiors, quality craftsmanship, and cutting electronic systems enables Media Rooms to provide complete integration of all these elements for each project. And Media Rooms' customers are as varied as its scope of services. "To many, we provide complete electronic and interior services. To others we design and build custom cabinetry to fit the client's existing electronics. For others we install a full range of electronics, from multiroom audio, to home theater, to complete home automation and systems integration."

Specifically, about 60 percent of clients request both electronic systems and cabinet/theater interior fabrication. Among the remaining 40 percent, half is electronics only and half is cabinet design and construction only. "Since we design everything we build, the client usually relies on us to design a cabinet or theater that fits their needs and space," Dzedzy explains. "We then also design an audio/video system that fits their needs and budget."

Media Room's installations run the gamut, from more affordable systems to the very elaborate. Home theater installations run from a single-chip DLP projector, a surround-sound receiver and in-wall speakers with no décor or seating to complete movie palace rooms. For those, the company designs the interior and fabricates the columns, acoustical wall panels, moldings and trim. Then they install a 3-chip DLP projector, separate surround processor and power amplifiers, Crestron touchscreen remote, lighting control, reclining chairs and a high-quality speaker system. Other services run from a small surround-sound system

with a flat-panel display to fully automated homes with touchscreens in every room controlling distributed audio, distributed video, lighting control, motorized window treatments, etc.

same high expectations I do. For the most part, anyone that we do work with from the other trades are people that we met on jobsites, where we can get to know them personally and see the quality of their work."



Dzedzy personally handles all Media Rooms Inc.'s theater and cabinet designs, a skill he picked up earning extra money building media cabinets for people in the 1970s.

Getting It Done

To get these jobs done right, Dzedzy has three electronic installers (two are CEDIA certified) on staff, three cabinetmakers, one salesperson and a secretary. His wife is also part of the business, and handles all of the order placements, client billing, Lutron programming as well as some Crestron programming. Dzedzy handles the day-to-day business and all of the theater design and cabinet design. He and his salesperson share client interaction and proposal writing.

Dzedzy prefers to provide most services in-house. Nothing is subcontracted with the exception of Crestron programming in large home automation projects and occasionally an electrician if there is line work that needs to be completed. "Our cabinetmakers do most small repairs to drywall when necessary," he says. "As far as partnering with others, it's difficult to find other trades that have the

And, to facilitate prospective clients seeing his own work, Dzedzy has a showroom. Its primary purpose is to show clients different options and design ideas. "It's not large and we do not have an entire wall of TVs, etc." he says. "What we do have are several examples of custom cabinetry, a listening room, a display room with various keypads and touchscreens, and an ornate Art Deco home theater."

Despite having a showroom, Dzedzy doesn't consider the business to be a retail one. It's not located on a busy highway; it's in a small mixed-use corporate park. For the most part, it operates by appointment only and meets most clients at their home, often in the evenings. The cabinet shop starts at 7:30 a.m. and core business hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

A typical Media Rooms project starts with the initial client meeting and a discussion about all of the possibilities avail-

able to them. "We determine their likes and desires. We discuss all of the basic elements of the room, including the size of the space, number of chairs, location of audio/video components and the design (and theme). The next step is to create a design and put together an equipment proposal. In most cases," Dzedzy points out, "our salesperson is also the system designer. That way we have better unity in the project. We then meet again with the client to review the proposals."

After the design is accepted the project is scheduled and fabrication begins. Once the basic room preparation is complete (pre-wire, patching, painting, etc.) installation is scheduled. All interior elements are fabricated in their shop. Depending on how elaborate it is the interior is usually installed in three to five days. Another two days are spent installing and testing the audio/video system. Lead times on projects vary, Dzedzy says. Large whole-house automation projects are tied into the construction schedule of the home and can take a year or longer. Most family room or basement theater projects take about eight to 12 weeks.

A Measured Approach

Choosing products is not an easy task for Dzedzy. He says he's constantly evaluating new products to see if they have a fit with both Media Rooms and its clients.

"I've always liked gadgets, but I am not the first person to recommend the latest item to a client. I want to make sure a product has a proven track and good manufacturer support," he says. "The last thing I want is to have my client be a 'test case' for a product or technology. Those situations end up costing you money because your installers spend an inordinate amount of time troubleshooting and programming."

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—Rob Dzedzy, Media Rooms Inc.



Media Rooms Inc. has a unique staff including three installers, three cabinetmakers, one salesperson and a secretary. Meanwhile, Dzedzy and his wife fill several critical roles.

Media Rooms is very involved with both new construction and existing construction. "Our area of the country," says Dzedzy, "has not had the crazy housing boom that other areas have experienced so the housing slowdown is not as pronounced. Also, our growth as a company is not as dramatic as is integration firms that are located in hot markets."

In terms of existing homes they're working in, Dzedzy is seeing more women in the homes taking interest in the projects, and says that's a good thing.

"Many times the electronic system is a passion of the male, but in most cases, the female is the one using the system and the one dealing with service issues." As a matter of course, he says his team always wears Media Rooms shirts during installations, lays down drop clothes, vacuums when they're done, and shows up on time.

To Dzedzy, the most rewarding part of running his business is seeing a completed home theater or media cabinet/system actually materialize. "It's great to see the design on paper, but to actually see it and hear it—wow, that's cool."

The most challenging part, he says, is the same for his business as for any other, and that's the business itself—hiring good employees, finding clients, managing the schedule, all those kinds of things. Dzedzy has been a member of CEDIA since its formation in 1989 and the Home Automation Association and is a THX Certified Installer.

Over the years, he's gone with several types of marketing and advertising, including direct mail, print advertising, open houses, and cold calling. Dzedzy has achieved what he set out to do—design and install of audio/video systems in conjunction with building custom furniture. He's passionate about what he does, and equally passionate about his clients—but not so passionate about growth.

"Any business owner wants to grow his business," he says, "but I am more concerned with our quality of service." **CE Pro**

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