

Old Fashioned Values, Cutting Edge Technology

Times have changed since Grass Technologies' humble beginnings in 1935, but the commitment to high-end digital devices has been well underway for more than a decade.

For Warwick, Rhode Island-based Grass Technologies 'www.grasstechnologies.com', longevity has never been an issue. Despite being acquired in 1994 by Astro-Med Inc, the company has remained intact since its inception during FDR's first term in 1935. However, once a company proves it can endure, the next challenge is often proving that it can change.

Marco Mancini, national sales manager for Grass Technologies, calls the company the "rock" of the industry, an entity that has been around since the beginning of the study of sleep. Whether measuring EEG or PSG signals, Grass Technologies has had a hand in the evolution of sleep diagnostics.

Competition and market potential have risen exponentially since the old days, and Mancini says there are still some prospective customers that he has not reached. "They need to realize that Grass has the latest cutting edge technology," says Mancini, a 13-year veteran at the company who started out writing software in the engineering department. "Over the years, it was somewhat tough to shake an image that we were this old, antiquated company. We are anything but that. Everything is digital. We have high-end analysis and software along with our world renowned amplifiers."

Our editor recently chatted with Mr. Mancini about the past, present, and what the future holds for Grass Technologies.

WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT YOUR COMPANY THAT IT HAS MANAGED TO THRIVE ALL THESE YEARS?

It tells the story, because these days there are so many competitors out there being sold or bought. Names are shifted among these companies, but we are the rock. We are part of Astro-Med, but we are really our own company. We have always been intact, and that leads to the continuous support of older generation products. People do not have to worry when they buy our equipment.

If you make a capital investment in equipment, and that company is sold out tomorrow, or the company goes out of business, what happens to the support on this equipment? That problem does not exist with customers who invest in Grass equipment.

YOU OFFER A LIFETIME WARRANTY FOR YOUR PRODUCTS, BUT DO YOU REQUIRE A SERVICE CONTRACT FOR THAT WARRANTY?

I have heard different people say that the lifetime warranty is only valid if you are on a service contract, or if you pay a certain amount per year, but that is *not* the case. We have a lifetime warranty, and there are no strings attached. We will repair or replace a malfunctioning product at no charge to our

customers. The lifetime warranty applies to all of the products that we manufacture, including the amplifiers, head boxes, photics, and more.

ARE PREDICTIONS ABOUT SLEEP MARKET POTENTIAL ACCURATE IN YOUR OPINION?

I think the estimates are right on the mark. Sleep apnea is so common. An increasingly large number of people that you probably know say, "I'm on a CPAP machine." My dad is on a CPAP machine, my mother's cousin, and my uncle. They are all over the place. So I do not think the potential is overestimated by any means. And in some communities, sleep medicine is just unknown. There are so many people that go undiagnosed.

WHY ARE SOME COMMUNITIES OUT OF THE LOOP?

In some cases, it is a matter of cost. It is a fairly expensive test, and if you go to a sleep lab, you are looking at studies that are about \$1,000 a night. And sometimes you need two nights. Insurance does cover this, but it is a little bit of an ordeal that you have to go through. It is not like other major tests such as MRIs where you go there and it is over in about an hour. Sleep patients need to spend a night or two in a lab which leads to some reluctance. A primary care physician may also be a bit reluctant to order a test that could be \$1,000 or \$2,000 if they are not familiar with sleep disorders.

HOW DO YOU DISTINGUISH YOURSELF AMONG A HOST OF WELL FINANCED COMPETITORS?

We are also well financed. We are a public company and our financials are available for all to see. We have a staff of engineers developing new hardware and software products on an on-going basis to assure the latest technology for our customers. We have an ISO9001 and ISO13485 audited facility where we manufacture everything from electrodes and sensors to amplifiers, stimulators, and software. Again, we are not a small company by any means. There are larger ones out there, but with the really large companies come all of those layers of management and red tape.

I like to get out in front of the customer as much as possible. I am there with the local salesperson, and we are able to meet these customers and give them a good look at the structure of the company. If there are issues, the buck stops with me. You can come to me for any support issues or sales issues, and we can quickly get these questions resolved.

HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN SUCH CONSISTENT TECHNICAL SUPPORT?

As far as support goes, that is really the number one sales feature that you can have. You can walk into a lab with the most innovative products—all that top-notch technology—

and it still comes down to the support. After you buy from us, how is the product going to be supported? You can call us in the middle of the night or of course during the day. We have a group here that is centralized in Rhode Island out of the home office. This group takes daytime phone calls, emergency pager calls through the night, and they rotate out in the field to get in front of the customers. This model allows our group to stay up to date with the latest products offered while staying in tune with the end user.

These full-time employees rotate through the night with an emergency pager, and you get a callback within 15 minutes. Those are full-time employees, so it is not a call center or something that goes overseas. These are knowledgeable tech support engineers that are responding to you in the middle of the night if you need it.

The last layer of support is the Grass College that we offer monthly. We invite customers back to our headquarters. It is a free college that is 2 days long. We review our system top to bottom with advanced training as well as basic training for the newer technicians. We have had great success with the Grass College. Customers come in and have that face-to-face time with support staff and the product people which works out well. Customers leave our facility feeling more familiar with Grass products and personnel. This sense of familiarity leads customers to be more comfortable calling the support line in the future.

HOW DID THE ECONOMY AFFECT YOUR BUSINESS IN 2009?

Despite the downturn in the economy, we have made some new hires over the last 6 months. We have hired two new tech support people, two field sales representatives, and are actively looking for further hires. On the order front, we did experience some slow down in the opening of new sleep labs as new construction money was tight. However, we are now seeing positive signs of recovery. We have consistent support and consistent field sales coverage out in the field and we are reaping the benefits of that consistent coverage.

YOU HAVE AN ENGINEERING BACKGROUND, YET HERE YOU ARE IN SALES. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?

It is something I grew into. When I started, I was writing software down in engineering. Back in 1996, we were just getting started with our digital line. We did have an integrated product line at that point. When Astro-Med first bought Grass, they hired a bunch of engineers—including me—to really get the digital side of the business going. Since I helped write the software, and I knew it so well, I started making visits out in the field and to different sleep laboratories. For me, the vast face time with the customers really brought on the sales side of the business. I went into tech support, product management, and eventually to sales manager.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT ATTRIBUTES WILL GO INTO A PARTICULAR PRODUCT?

We ultimately design our product based on customer feedback through constant traveling and visiting. We visit with customers and see how they are using our products, and see what they want out of the software package. People always ask: "Are you a polysomnographer?" I say, "Well, I'm not, but I've probably visited about 500 labs."

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR HOME-GROWN PHILOSOPHY?

We have our own engineers and our own production right here in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. We produce our products, and we directly sell and support them, so there is no middleman. We build a quality product [the Comet® XL Lab-based PSG is one of many], but if something does go wrong, we fix it quickly, and we turn it right around for you. We design, manufacture, and sell nearly all of our products, unlike many of our competitors who purchase key elements, such as software or amplifiers, from third parties. **For more information visit www.grasstechnologies.com**

Marco Mancini is the National Sales Manager for Grass Technologies. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering that he acquired with Distinction from the University of Rhode Island in 1996.