



Customers of Chattanooga, Tenn.-Area Computer Retailer Enjoy Tech-Support Bonus

By Bob Gary Jr., Chattanooga Times/Free Press, Tenn.

Mar. 30--Not everyone would take advantage of a chance to tweak his or her personal history, but Steve Flegal would.

The 57-year-old owner of Affordable Computers is starting his second decade with that business, the annual sales of which have hit the \$1 million mark. He freely admitted, though, that, given a chance to rewrite the past, he would.

"I should never have quit industrial sales to start my own business," he said. "I'd be retired by now."

But at the same time, he said, he's happy at his Highway 58 shop.

"I sleep well at night," he said. "It's all in knowing that we do a good job. We try to have a computer for any budget, and we support our customers as long as they have their machines."

Bob Hilton, owner of Chattanooga-based Tennessee Valley Mortgage, said that support is why he's been a client of Mr. Flegal's since 1999.

"When I need something fixed, it gets fixed," said Mr. Hilton, who has eight personal computers in his two offices. "He's got great technicians -- if my system has a glitch, he'll send somebody over to fix it.

"I can't get that online," Mr. Hilton said.

Mr. Flegal said he hasn't spent his entire career in computers. An industrial engineering major at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, his first job was "assistant to the director of production control management" for 12 Buster Brown factories.

"The most repetitive, boring job I ever had in my life," he said. "I got fed up, but people told me not to leave my first job out of college in less than a year. So I stayed 13 months, which was all I could stomach.

"The corporate environment," he said, "is not my thing."

Mr. Flegal said he went into industrial sales and was soon flying high.

"I doubled my sales every year," he said. "I had a company car, benefits, making good money.

"Then," he said, "I got cocky in 1979 and quit."

He said he helped start a computer scrap recovery business, but the focus of the business, National Computer Traders, soon shifted to system recovery.

"We found we could sell parts to major maintenance companies nationwide," he said. "We bought millions of pounds of used mainframes from Fortune 500 companies and resold systems."

After mainframes "died" in the late 1980s, he said, he moved to PCs -- buying and brokering used machines discarded by large corporations.

He said he sold that business, USA Computers, in 1992 and tried to get back into industrial sales.

"It didn't work," he said. "I missed it, but I found you really can't go back once you've had your

own business."

So he started Affordable Computers, the annual sales of which have been as high as \$1 million but were a bit more than \$642,000 last year.

"We haven't lost sales," he said. "Remember, computers that used to be \$1,299 are now \$599. It's a tough business because the (profit) margins are so low."

He said the business is made even tougher by major computer makers, whose offshore manufacturing and support operations are growing.

"At least we sell computers built in the U.S.A.," he said, "and ours is American support -- call us, and you won't talk to someone in India.

"I wish more people cared about buying American, but it seems all anyone cares about anymore is price," Mr. Flegal said.

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