

A Visionary enterprise

Firm grows from basement to multimillion dollar company

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Greg Worthen works on sales sheets Tuesday afternoon at Visionary Broadband.



Preston Schilling, left, talks through the doorway to Sean Kennedy, chief technology officer at Visionary Broadband, on Tuesday afternoon.



Brian Worthen, CEO of Gillette-based Visionary Broadband, sits in his office Tuesday afternoon.

- [News Record Photo/Kelly Wenzel](#)

In fall 1994, three graduates of Campbell County High School started a new venture in a basement on East Laurel Street in Gillette.

Clay Cundy, Jeremy Malli and Malcolm Shepard didn't know much about business, but they loved computers and were excited about the potential of the internet.

Then, getting internet access in Gillette meant dialing long distance to Casper or Rapid City, South Dakota. So to get free access to AOL and avoid expensive phone bills, they started their own internet service provider in Cundy's basement. They called it Visionary Communications.

The trio had five dial-up lines and were ready to have customers start dialing in by Christmas Day, and they needed 60 users to break even. On Dec. 5, 1994, the Campbell County School District ordered 80 accounts.

Twenty-three years later, the company that started in a Gillette basement now operates from the Pacific Northwest to the American Southwest, thriving in an industry where the only constant is change, where those who refuse to evolve are left behind.

"That's why we named the company Visionary, because we had to look ahead and see where things are going," said Cundy, who now owns a network consulting firm but is still part of Visionary as an owner. "You have to begin with the end in mind. Technology has no end, so you have to be continually evolving."

"Every three to four years, we've had to pivot to some new technology," said CEO and President Brian Worthen, adding that the company is on its sixth pivot since he joined in 2001. "The technology we're putting out right now will probably be end of life in two to three years."

Today, Visionary has more than 60 employees, up from 50 in 2016. It has about 11,000 accounts and services 70 companies with its wholesale division.

Its operations span from Spokane, Washington, to Billings, Montana, down through Wyoming and Denver to New Mexico and Arizona.

Worthen said it's adding a net of 50 to 60 new accounts per week, and it added about 1,000 broadband customers in the last four months.

"For us, that's big," Worthen said. "For a large company, that's just a Tuesday."

Visionary made \$25.7 million in revenue in 2016 and about \$20.5 million in 2017.

Last year, Worthen found that his company was growing too big and it was hard to keep up with. So he sold about \$10.5 million of Visionary's out-of-state business in "far-flung states" like Georgia, Illinois and Minnesota.

It was a tough decision, but the right one, he said, because he believes Visionary should focus more on its home state.

"We earned enough money out of state where taking that capital and putting it in Wyoming means we can improve services here," he said.

Visionary has expanded to the point where it's ready to offer coverage to 380,000 people in Wyoming, he added.

The pioneer spirit

Within six months of starting up, Visionary had outgrown Cundy's basement.

It also had outgrown the available infrastructure in Gillette, Cundy said, adding that to support Visionary's growth, "CenturyLink had to ramp up their capacity."

Cundy remembers having to go to customers' houses and businesses to install software on their computers.

"Everything was new back then," said Malli, now chief technology officer for Mammoth Networks, Visionary's wholesale division.

They were self-taught, for the most part, and as Visionary grew, technology advanced. And the guys had to learn quickly just to keep their heads above water.

There was no precedent for tech support. When a problem popped up, they didn't have anyone to go to for answers, so they had to come up with their own solutions.

"We had to do it on the fly," Cundy said. "It was a lot like the pioneer spirit, heading out into the unknown. You didn't know how it was going to go."

Cundy admits that while they could handle everything as far as technology was concerned, they were lacking on the business side. Billing software didn't exist, so customers would come into the office and pay their bills in cash.

"We basically had a drawer full of money," he said.

Because of their issues with keeping track of cash flow, there were "times when we wouldn't be able to pay ourselves," Cundy said, adding that he always made sure employees were paid.

Follow the leader

While this was going on, Worthen was working for Coach USA. He knew Cundy, Malli and Shepard from high school, and they knew that he had a background in business, having studied small business management at the University of Wyoming.

"We needed leadership, we needed to know where we were going," Cundy said. They needed him to "tell us what we need to do and we'll go do it."

So in 2001, Worthen joined Visionary as an investor. He ended up buying out most of the ownership, and under his leadership Visionary “has exploded,” Cundy said.

But it’s taken some creativity.

For a while, Visionary supplied most of Gillette’s internet, but in the early 2000s, competitors like CenturyLink and Bresnan (now part of Charter) started offering internet.

“(That’s when) we saw some of our customer base go away,” Worthen said.

On top of that, Visionary was paying a lot of money in huge contracts for dial-up, which was dying out and being replaced by digital subscriber line (DSL), a revolutionary technology that allowed people to use the internet and the phone at the same time.

Worthen found a loophole in the contract that allowed them to replace an existing contract with a new one. In 2004, Visionary formed a wholesale division, Mammoth Networks, and sold circuits to internet service providers in other states. It was a risk that had no revenue tied to it and cost the company \$64,000 a month, but it came in handy 10 years later.

When the most recent economic downturn hit Gillette, many people got rid of their internet and some customers moved away, Worthen said. But Mammoth Networks was still growing, with a 90 percent increase in revenue from 2014-2016. That more than made up for what was going on in Campbell County.

Blessing and a curse

Cundy said one reason Visionary has succeeded is because of its location.

“We live in a market that doesn’t attract a lot of competition from major players,” he said. “If we tried to survive in Colorado, we’d have fought an uphill battle.”

It's a blessing and a curse. Gillette isn't overflowing with tech professionals, and Malli said recruiting workers from out of state has been a challenge for Visionary. Instead, it works with what it already has.

"We've taken an approach of hiring as many people as we can locally because we want to keep money here in Wyoming," Worthen said. "We trained them and put them in situations where they learned."

That's just the attitude that Gillette has, Worthen said: a willingness to roll up its sleeves and get to work.

Technical skills are great, but Malli said he'd rather have someone who's humble and willing to take risks.

"I want somebody who is not afraid to be wrong. That's a big deal. What it means is they're not afraid to try things, look at things, and when they're wrong and I tell them, they don't get offended at that," he said.

Sean Kennedy remembers when his mom dropped him off at Visionary for his first job when he was 15 years old. He was working as a web developer then. He's with Visionary 15 years later as its chief technology officer.

It's the only job he's had, he said, and he enjoys it.

"The best thing about it is once you establish yourself here, show you're a hard worker and you're confident in what you can do, they give you the tools and the free rein to make decisions," he said.

It's a work environment that encourages the cultivation of new ideas, he said.

"You can come into work and dream up something new, and there's a good chance it will be implemented," Kennedy said. "They listen."

Cundy and Worthen came from family businesses, and Cundy said they brought that philosophy to Visionary.

“Our employees are more important to us than we are,” he said. “We haven’t operated this business to line our pockets. We plowed all the earnings back into the business to make it grow.

“It’s not always about making money. Sometimes it’s about making a healthy business.”

The reason Visionary’s been around this long, Malli said, was that it grew organically and didn’t borrow money if it didn’t have to. There were pay cuts, there were years when growth slowed down and it operated on a shoestring budget.

“You make those sacrifices and try to do what’s in the best interests of the company,” Malli said. “We lived within our means.”

Not too big to fail

The word “diversification” is thrown around a lot about Wyoming’s economy. Visionary’s been diversifying for years, Worthen said, because it’s the only way to survive.

“Companies that don’t continue to evolve and push the boundaries of technology are doomed for failure,” Malli said.

The giants of the 1990s like Alta Vista, AOL and Yahoo, struggled to stay ahead of the curve, he said, and they were overtaken by more forward-thinking companies.

“You just have to make sure that you’re always keeping an eye on the horizon, where the winds are coming from, whatever that may be,” Malli said. “Don’t assume the direction that it’s going to take. Just look, keep an eye on it and adjust accordingly.”

It’s a philosophy that Gillette and Campbell County would be wise to follow, Cundy said.

“At this point, I think Gillette is very stagnant,” he said. “Unless we can really see a shift in our view of our economy and what’s important in our community, then Gillette is going to have to sit and pray that there’s another energy boom.”

Malli said it’s also just as important “to not get lazy,” to keep an eye on who’s in the rearview mirror.

He used MySpace as an example. In 2005, the social networking site was bought by News Corp. for \$580 million, and in 2006 it was the most visited website in the country. Just five years later, it was sold for \$35 million. Meanwhile, its rival, Facebook, is now worth more than \$500 billion.

“They did not take seriously what Facebook was doing and they just completely imploded,” Malli said.

Never underestimate the power of the people, Malli said, especially these days. Google and Amazon might seem invincible now, but if they made a move that angered customers, people “will jump ship the same day.”

That’s why Visionary focuses on the service aspect of internet service. Making money is important to any business, but there would be no money if it weren’t for the people who believed in the business.

“I think striving to do the right thing is huge,” Worthen said. “I can’t even say we always do that, but we try. Sometimes we drop the ball, but treating people with respect and doing right by them, it pays off.

“The pride people take in supporting a local business is huge in Wyoming. And when people show us thanks, we walk a little taller.”