



# Entering the TechnoZone

Technology helps local business owners in a variety of ways.

By Ellen Jensen  
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Technology is everywhere. Just as it continually redefines our personal lives, technology also redefines small businesses, making them more efficient and productive. It helps level the playing field for small businesses, allowing them to compete with larger companies. Although in some circles, the phrase "investing in technology" simply refers to the number of computers you have, many local businesses are using technology in unique ways to improve their businesses.

## Improving Efficiencies

Boulevard Brewing Company has built a new brewhouse, a major technological advancement both on the hardware and software sides, said plant engineer Mike Utz. The equipment is much larger and the brewing process is almost completely automated, except for quality-assurance decisions and minor ingredient additions. The new system opens and shuts valves as necessary and monitors and controls temperatures. It also is energy efficient, recovering waste heat from boiling operations to preheat subsequent batches.

"We are able to run this new brewhouse-which is four times larger than the old one-with one person," Utz said.

Dean Barber, owner of Barber Financial Group, uses technology to improve efficiency in his marketing efforts. He can use software to target specific groups of clients. For example, if Barber sees an interesting article on college education, he can send it to those clients who are concerned about the issue. It's also easy to personalize the contact with a short note.

## Critical Technology

In some cases, technology makes the company more efficient. In others, technology makes the company. There's technology, and then there's technology, said Chris O'Connor, a partner and director of Web service for Liquid 9, a post-production company. The company has plenty of the basic technology that most businesses must invest in to survive-an assortment of PCs, Macs, servers, laptops and desktops. Then there's the technology that defines the business.

To compete in their industry, O'Connor and his partners had to invest in professional software tools for audio and video editing. They recently went a step further and purchased an elite set of software tools to do finishing work-adding in effects and graphics. The software requires yearly upgrades and support in the neighborhood of 10 thousand dollars a year, O'Connor said. That's

no small investment, but one that is crucial to the company's success. When Liquid 9 first opened its doors, they offered audio and video editing only, and their biggest competitor got all the finishing business.

"Acquiring that equipment became critical," O'Connor said. "Finishing is now a separate division of the business."

Image Impact, which provides brand placement evaluation and analysis information, would not be in existence without technology. Not only does the company use high-tech systems to provide its services, but if it weren't for technology, Image Impact wouldn't have a market for its services. TV commercials have become less effective because of technology that allows consumers to skip them, so advertisers are turning to sponsorships and brand placement within televised programs to reach consumers. They want to make sure they are getting the most bang for the buck, which is where Image Impact comes in.

The company developed software to capture the brand image, size and duration. Then it assigns a quality and monetary value to each detection.

"Brand placement measurement has become a science," said Russ Cline, Image Impact owner. "Advertisers pay millions of dollars for sponsorships, and they want to be sure they are getting a return on their investment."

### **Improved User Experience**

Sometimes, technology just makes performing tasks easier and more enjoyable. Barber said that while he's far from a technogeek in his personal life, he has made it a point to check out new technologies to see whether they will make life easier for his staff and clients. He was first in line to sign up for high-speed DSL service, and when large plasma screens became available, Barber invested in those for his conference rooms.

"When a client comes in, I can just take my wireless mouse and keyboard into the conference room, and clients can see everything I'm doing on the 60-inch plasma screen," Barber said.

He also uses a program called FinanceWare, which creates a financial plan for clients as they watch. It's Web-based and interactive, so clients can view the status of their plan from anywhere they have access to the Internet. The software also allows Barber to set up alarms to warn him if something gets outside parameters he and the client have set.

"That way, I don't have to check each client's portfolio every day," he said.

TinMaster designs, fabricates and installs heating and air conditioning ductwork systems in commercial buildings. The process begins by obtaining a set of documents and drawings for bid purposes. Then they put together a bid proposal.

If successful, they create their shop drawings in detail using an auto cad system and Quick Pen software.

Once the shop drawings are approved, TinMaster fabricates the ductwork using five-foot-by-10-foot sheets of metal.

Computers send instructions to the plasma cutter, which cuts out the pattern, or fitting. Before investing in the plasma cutter, several employees cut the fittings by hand on a table, said Arthur Tanner, president of TinMaster.

"The plasma cutter is much faster and more precise," Tanner said. "It can fit many patterns on a large metal sheet, resulting in much less waste."

### **The Medical Edge**

Some entrepreneurs use technology to better serve their customers-or patients, as the case may be-and to nudge their businesses to the next level. Dr. Prabu Raman is one of just a few dentists across the country using a new 3-D imaging system to diagnose and treat patients. The i-CAT 3-D Cone Beam Imaging System produces a 3-D X-ray image of the patient's head and neck resulting in detailed craniofacial imaging. Raman uses the i-CAT at the Raman Center, where he treats patients suffering from headaches and facial pain. His services include neuromuscular dentistry, functional orthodontics and aesthetic dentistry.

The i-CAT creates 3-D images of a patient's anatomy in less than a minute and produces as much as 50 times less radiation than medical CT machines. The detailed imagery allows Raman to view problem areas and plan treatment prior to the procedure. Patients sit upright in the open-air i-CAT, which provides optimal posture and bone and muscle positioning.

"Our in-office i-CAT puts state-of-the-art technology at our disposal, and it offers our patients the convenience of having the best resources under one roof," Raman said.

Raman will use the iCAT primarily to extend his treatment of head and facial pain and get a closer look at patients' airways, temporomandibular joints, head and neck-which all contribute to pain and jaw misalignment. The technology also will help Raman in functional orthodontics, dental implant planning and correcting impacted teeth.

"The i-CAT lets us to do a virtual surgery ahead of time to discover better treatment options and possible challenges," Raman said. "I can educate patients about their conditions through image manipulation and demonstrate what treatment process will take place."

### **Sweet Rewards**

Kevin Lyman, owner of Kokopelli Mexican Cantina, uses technology to stay connected with his customers. Kokopelli is part of the KC Originals, a group of local independent restaurateurs. The group invested in the PowerCard reciprocal rewards program. Customers who sign up get a \$10 gift certificate every time they spend \$150 at any of the KC Originals restaurants. The gift certificate is redeemable at any of the Originals restaurants.

PowerCard manages the group's customer database, and restaurant owners can also keep track of their own customers who sign up for the program. PowerCard sends out a monthly e-newsletter to the entire database, and the individual restaurant owners can keep in contact with their own customers as often as they choose. Lyman periodically sends coupons to his best customers, for example.

The group database has grown to 25,000 customers, and Lyman has signed up more than 4,000 at his restaurant alone. He said the technology has proved to be a powerful tool to generate new business and keep existing business coming back.

"I know these people dine out because they signed up at one of the KC Originals restaurants," Lyman said. "The KC Originals gets a 20 percent redemption on their offers because they hit their target market of diners."

Customers can click on e-newsletter links to find out their point balance and to send back comments about their dining experience.

## **Integration**

Kokopelli's point of sale system is integrated with the PowerCard database, and Lyman can track the customer's check and find out who their server was and rectify any problems. The software also keeps track of customer birthdays and anniversaries.

"It's a tool for us to do a lot of things," Lyman said. "We invested \$150 initially for the software and training, and then spend \$100 a month for the service, but it's worth it."

Integration is important to Boulevard Brewing Company, as well. The brewery worked with a local integrator to develop a proprietary technology to track kegs. Employees code each keg so they know what beer is in the keg, when it was packaged and what pallet it goes on. That data is linked to the business system. Utz said they are working on linking all production data to the business system to improve reporting and efficiency tracking.

They could have purchased a canned solution, but it wouldn't completely integrate into the Boulevard system, Utz said. For this application, it was worth the investment to develop their own system on a standard platform.

## **Custom Software**

LionShare uses a product called DIATA, an acronym for "data intelligence and tactical analysis." It's a software solution for measuring marketing campaigns. It allows LionShare to track clients' campaigns, measure the return on investment and better target prospects for future campaigns—for example, how many times they had to touch a consumer or client to get them to buy the product or use the service.

Jones said the software is customized for LionShare, but she partnered with a company out of the United Kingdom to provide the backbone of that technology. LionShare clients also can purchase the rights to use the software, or they can subscribe to LionShare's service.

"It gives us peace of mind about the marketing campaign we are suggesting," Jones said. "DIATA helps us deliver better marketing, so we save our client marketing dollars by doing a better job targeting potential prospects."

Liquid 9 uses a customized billing system, which is how they log time and keep track of the media they are using. O'Connor said he looked at a lot of software before deciding to go custom. Each product did a portion of what he wanted to do, but none did everything. He took the best parts of each system and built his own.

Boulevard also went with custom software for its data management system, which manages recipes for different beers, collects data and stores it. The company initially was reluctant to accept a proprietary solution because it didn't want to be locked into one vendor.

"If you have to go back to that vendor, they can charge any rate for service and upgrades," Utz said.

Boulevard worked out a compromise where the code that makes machines run was developed and maintained by the vendor, but all of the data is open access. As a small, growing company, Boulevard changes things often, Utz said.

They launch a new beer, or add a valve or pump or delete a piece of equipment as they refine their processes.

"If we want to modify the way we make beer, we need to be able to make system changes using internal resources," Utz said. "These integrators' billing rates are around \$150 per hour. You can rack up big costs in a hurry."

### **Old School Benefits**

Sometimes the cost outweighs the technology benefit. Lyman said some restaurants have invested in handheld computers. Servers enter the order at the table, and the order goes straight back to the kitchen. Lyman hasn't bought into this technology yet because he is still skeptical that the benefits outweigh the negatives. He doesn't want his servers staring down at a computer instead of making eye contact with the customers.

"They become order takers instead of salespeople," Lyman said. "They are there to interact with customers, and to up-sell, which increases my sales and their tips."

Then there's the economic drawback. They're not cheap yet, Lyman said—about \$3,000 a unit. On Friday nights, he has seven servers on the floor.

Lyman also laments the fact that technology sometimes comes at the expense of human contact and personal service.

"You even scan and sack your own groceries now," Lyman said. "We are still trying to promote our service."

### **Investment**

People often want to make a true dollar-to-dollar comparison in terms of technology and investment, O'Connor said. For Liquid 9, there is value in having a competitive advantage and easier lifestyle. O'Connor believes in adopting new technology and using it for whatever he can. He said sometimes cost is used as an excuse for not investing in new technology, but the real culprit is inertia—it's easier to stay with the status quo.

"I believe this is reflective of a company's culture and is a warning sign," O'Connor said.

Owners who invest in technology tend to extend that philosophy to the rest of the business, he said. They are continually looking for better processes and have a fresher approach to their business as a whole.

"That's the kind of company we strive to be, not one that sits back and says, 'This the way we have done things so it's the way we are going to continue to do things,'" O'Connor said.

Barber acknowledged that technology does require extra training of staff, and sometimes employees can hide behind technology. Still, he said the benefits of the technology outweigh any drawbacks. Barber has made a point to stay on the cutting edge of what's available. He bought his first computer in 1987, and he said there's no telling how many computers he has bought since then.

"Technology and tech support is one of my largest expenses, but it also is one of the main drivers of profits," Barber said.

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