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CAREER PATH

Patience key to getting signal through

'You have to keep with it,' says chief of Lisle company

By Ann Therese Palmer
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Six years ago, Ross Manire decided to start his own business after the company he worked at was bought out.

Manire, who had been a senior executive of several metro Chicago communications technology companies, explored cell phone communications.

After his Lisle-based company, ExteNet Systems, was outbid on cell phone tower packages, Manire decided to concentrate on antenna systems. The systems are affixed to structures such as traffic signals or telephone poles and signals relayed by fiber optics to a central network.

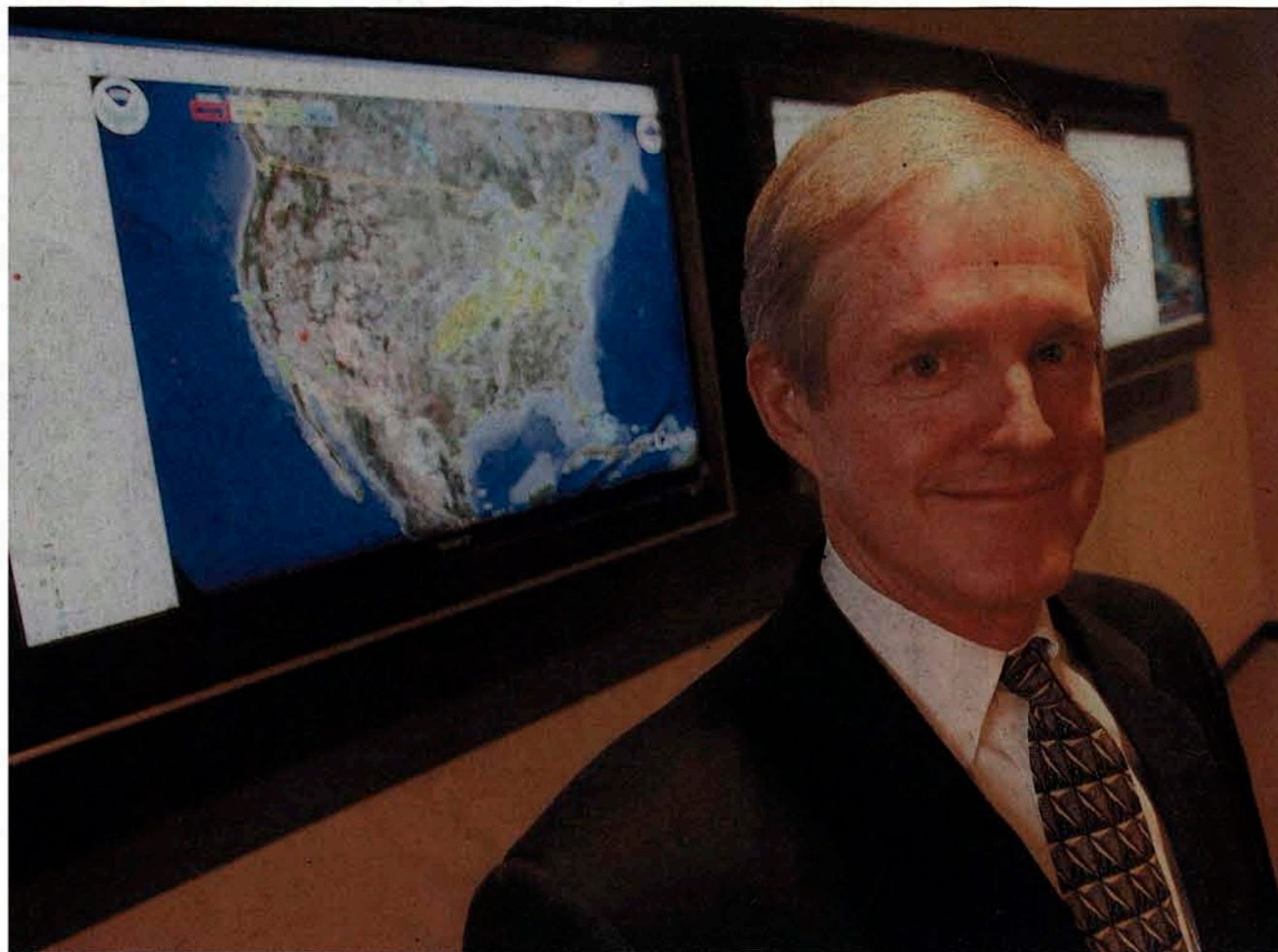
"I thought their inherent advantages were very clear," Manire said. "I completely underestimated what it would take to successfully sell this concept to wireless service providers. It was frustrating, the toughest job I've had in my career."

He rethought his approach and hired additional experts.

"Because we were selling across multiple platforms in a company — marketing, radio frequency engineers, municipal experts — we needed more bench strength," he said. "As it became increasingly difficult to place traditional cell towers, and capacity requirements dramatically increased, after countless presentations customers finally began understanding the value of our business."

This experience taught Manire, 57, "patience and the ability to keep on even keel."

"It's frustrating being turned down repeatedly, not getting closure on a sale," he said. "You have to recognize if you believe in what you're



Ross Manire of ExteNet Systems had trouble selling his antenna systems concept to wireless service providers until he brought in experts from such areas as marketing and municipal governments to join his team. COREY R. MINKANIC/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

doing, in the technology and in the direction you're going, you have to keep with it, keep trying new ways to get your ideas through to people. Today, ExteNet Systems counts all major communications companies as its customers."

Q What prompted you to work in telecommunications?

A When I was a manager at Arthur Young, the firm established the Entrepreneur of the Year award program. In the program's first year, I had the opportunity to interview one of the Chicago nominees, Casey Cowell at USRobotics, which

wasn't a client. I became fascinated with what they were doing. When they got ready to take the company public, I was recruited to the job as chief financial officer.

Q When you first managed someone, what did you learn about management you hadn't known before?

A After I graduated from college, to earn money for my MBA, I started a small business doing home-improvement projects. It was an eye-opener: I'd never realized before how important communication is. The customer had expectations, the kids working for me had expectations, I had expectations. If

everyone wasn't on the same page, projects ended up being redone.

Even when everyone's on the same page, problems can ensue. I remember a gentleman contracted with us for a particular project. I wrote a contract. He signed it. Once we started the job, we learned his wife didn't want what he'd contracted for. He paid, but I learned to make sure you always know who the decision-maker is.

Q What's one of the most important jobs you do at work?

A When I started ExteNet, I promised myself I'd interview every person we hired, including the support

staff. We're now at 63 people.

When you're a small, entrepreneurial organization, you've got to be able to wear a lot of different hats at a lot of different times. Everyone helps make the business successful. I need to make sure who we're hiring is comfortable with uncertainty and can adapt to changing circumstances.

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How did they do it?

For more stories by Ann Therese Palmer on how executives have developed their job skills, go to chicago.tribune.com/careerpath

Step by step

2002-present: Chief executive, ExteNet Systems, Lisle

2000-02: Division president, Flextronics, Westchester

1999-2000: Chief executive, Chatham Technologies, Dallas/Westchester

1997-98: Senior vice president, 3Com Corp., Mount Prospect

1995-97: Senior vice president, USRobotics, Mount Prospect

1991-95: Chief financial officer/senior vice president, USRobotics, Skokie

1989-91: Partner, Ridge Capital, Barrington

1984-89: Partner, entrepreneurial services group, Ernst & Young, Chicago

1983-84: Principal, entrepreneurial services group, Arthur Young, Chicago

1981-83: Accounting consultant, Standard Oil of Indiana, Chicago

1980-81: Manager, Arthur Young

1976-80: Staff accountant, Arthur Young

1976: Master's degree in business administration, University of Chicago

1976: Winter internship, Arthur Young

1975: Summer accounting intern, Naron, Wagner & Voslow, Baltimore

1974: Summer owner, Wild Cat Enterprises, Alexandria, Va.

1974: Bachelor of arts degree, Davidson College, Davidson, N.C.

1973: Summer mover, Mayflower, Alexandria

1970-71: Summer mover, Allied Van Lines, Alexandria