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Profile of Success: Michael A. Bartrom

Michael A. (Mike) Bartrom knows the ebbs and flows of entrepreneurship. This seasoned entrepreneur has started and grown four successful businesses in Marion, Indiana. "I love doing what I do," commented Bartrom. "Most of the time it feels more like a hobby than a job."

Growing up on a small farm outside of Alexandria, Indiana, Bartrom always had the desire to work, even starting his own business in junior high. Holding odd jobs, Bartrom successfully put himself through Purdue University where he earned an Associates Degree in Electrical Engineering Technology. He also took several business courses, based on his career goals at Ball State University. And in the midst of his education, he met and married Sherri, who would later become his business partner.

Directly out of college, Bartrom accepted an electrical machine designer position at the RCA plant in Marion, Indiana and eventually became a third shift foreman. While working third shift, Bartrom used his days for a hobby – one that quickly grew into a real business. He started Computer Age Engineering in his garage in 1982, converting machine controllers from relays to programmable logic controllers (PLCs). "This was our main focus, and we really got a good start," stated Bartrom. "We were successful right away."

In 1985 Bartrom resigned from RCA and within one year had outgrown the garage and moved the business to its current building. After three additions it has become a 14,000 square foot building that includes shop and office areas. "When we moved, we started building complete machines for companies that make parts," Bartrom remembered. "Our productivity was very important, so we started using CAD (computer aided design) right away."

With the growth of business and existing opportunities, Sherri resigned from her teaching position and became her husband's business partner. "Sherri handles the money and is also a strategic manager," stated Bartrom. "And she's involved so we stay organized."

Knowing there are significant advantages to serving a niche market, Computer Age Engineering "decided to focus on the automotive rubber market – vehicle sealing and vibration control. We now have a line of equipment for companies that make those parts," explained Bartrom. "Our clients are primarily in North America, and we just shipped our first machine to China."

From its humble beginnings as a one-man shop in a garage, Computer Age Engineering now employs over 25 employees – most of which are very knowledgeable, including top engineers and skilled tradesmen. The company has been awarded multiple patents for vibration control equipment, including quick change tooling designs, close loop tuning and segment designs.

Knowing the importance of productivity for both themselves and their clients, Computer Age Engineering was a reseller for Autodesk, the author of AutoCAD drafting software. However, Bartrom's employees "wrote their own software on top of AutoCAD so they could design much faster than using AutoCAD alone. We took the software to a trade show in 1988 in Anaheim, California and were in the Autodesk booth. We sold over \$23,000 of software in one weekend without fancy packaging or an operator's manual," recalled Bartrom. "We came back, wrote a manual, and started the software company VIA Development Corporation."

Sherri took over the day-to-day operations of VIA Development and was instrumental in VIA's success. They lead the way in the controls design software industry with many firsts, including developing the first electrical controls drafting software application for AutoCAD that contained automatic circuit generation routines, and the first to produce electrical drafting software for AutoCAD® LT. Up until the time the company was sold in 2003 to Autodesk, they experienced annual growth of 20 percent.

With the sale of VIA Development Corporation, Bartrom embarked on yet another venture. In 2003, Muscle Car Accessories became a division of Computer Age Engineering. "I have always been a car fanatic," explained Bartrom. "When restoring a car, I created new parts for both the car and the garage. Now, we manufacture the parts at Computer Age Engineering and have been selling them through distributors for about 18 months. And we are getting ready to introduce more parts."

Seeing the capacity to take on more, Bartrom and his daughter, Melissa, are rolling out Banazzle, LLC, a modern discount motor club. While still in startup mode, the company will launch and release their website in September, 2006. "People will be able to buy the Banazzle discount card to receive discounts on anything associated with motor vehicles around the U.S., such as car washes, oil changes, tires, and tune ups" Bartrom explained.

Throughout his career and with the rollout of each new entity, Bartrom has continued to learn. "I read everything and listen to tapes – sales, management, whatever I need at the time," said Bartrom. "In fact, I just bought three books on PR for the new company (Banazzle)."

He has also relied on mentors. "My grandfather taught me how to build things and that all things are possible," recalled Bartrom. "Ralph Helfen was an RCA engineer that took me under his wing. He taught me how to network with people and sell ideas. He gave me confidence to talk to anyone. Al Hummer (also at RCA) taught me how to plan things out in very good detail. I still use his hit list and way of prioritizing."

Despite all of his learning, Bartrom believes the "real credit goes to the people who work (at Computer Age Engineering). I set goals and plans and then get out of the way. People with good values and strong work ethics can make things happen. I have goals for each part of the company, and it only takes five minutes to look at them every day," stated Bartrom. "I have always had a plan and achieved goals."

Through all of the changes and company ventures, one constant has been family. "Family has always been very important with Sherri and I. We are always doing a lot with our kids," stated Bartrom.

In an attempt to assist other entrepreneurs in their quest for success, Bartrom has several "Tips from an Entrepreneur":

1. Believe in yourself and trust your instincts.
2. Set goals and make them "stretch" goals – goals that are hard to meet.
3. Make detailed plans to achieve your goals.
4. Communicate goals and plans within the company and support professionals.
5. Review goals and plans daily.
6. Achieve something every day that brings you closer to achieving your goals.