

MISSISSIPPI BUSINESS JOURNAL

Mississippi's Essential Source for Business News

November 10, 2003

Fast Growth Lands Jackson's IMS on Inc. 500

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"My grandfather was in the construction business," said Rod L. Hill, P.E. "He made sure we were exposed to what he was doing and his success. He earned everything he had. There were others along the way that helped me stay the course. But he was my role model."

In 1996, two former City of Jackson employees, John D. Calhoun, Ph.D., and Rod L. Hill, P.E., believed they saw a niche for an engineering firm focused on the unique needs of urban areas, and formed Integrated Management Services (IMS). What a niche it has turned out to be.

Over the past five years, IMS has recorded a phenomenal sales growth of 908%. How good is that? Good enough to rank the firm 183rd on *Inc.* magazine's 2003 Inc. 500, a list of the 500 fastest -growing private companies in the country. According to Calhoun, the success can be attributed to a surprisingly simple, common strategy, which has resulted in 98% of its business coming from repeat customers.

"We see ourselves as partners with our clients. We try very hard to listen to our customers, and provide them with what they want," he said matter-of-factly.

For both Calhoun and Hill, understanding inner-city needs comes easy. Calhoun, a native of Jackson who went on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees from Memphis University, Jackson State University and Ole Miss, grew up in the heart of the city with meager resources. Hill, a Florida native, was raised in the "projects" and went to on to earn degrees from Jackson State and Ole Miss.

For Hill, it was his grandfather that left the most lasting imprint on him. His grandfather died when he was 12 years old, yet Hill still speaks on him with deep emotion.

"My grandfather was in the construction business," remembered Hill, a man of few words. "He made sure we were exposed to what he was doing and his success. He earned everything he had. There were others along the way that helped me stay the course. But he was my role model."

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Considering their backgrounds, it should come as little surprise that both principals (Calhoun is CEO; Hill is President/COO) feel strongly about giving back to the communities they live and work in.

But they have gone a step further – community involvement is written in the firm's mission statement and along with customer service has formed the basis for IMS' growth.

That growth came right out of the gate for IMS. The company first set up shop in the Jackson Enterprise Center, a business incubator. But it wouldn't last – within three months, even though IMS started with just three employees, it had outgrown the facility. The current headquarters are located on the top floor of the Plaza Building in downtown Jackson.

IMS outgrew not only Jackson but Central Mississippi as well almost as quickly. Two years ago, it opened a second office in Memphis, and just this year opened another office in New Orleans. And as a Nissan-Canton vendor, IMS also has personnel housed in Canton. All together, the firm employs some 250 workers.

The consulting, engineering, technical, management and operations firm offers a wide range of services. These include everything from aviation engineering and construction management and inspection to environmental engineering and operations and maintenance.

The firm's clients are just as varied. Among its customer base are federal, state and local government entities as well as large corporations and businesses such as Nissan, Motorola and Siemens.

IMS' success now has reached a national audience with its inclusion in the Inc. 500. *Inc.* editor John Koten, in a letter to IMS, wrote, "By joining this elite group for growth companies, your achievement will be nationally recognized by millions of readers – an audience that includes your customers, vendors, investors and business partners."

In addition to the great national ink the firm is receiving from making the list, both Calhoun and Hill said it meant a lot to the firm in terms of self-confidence and feeling of achievement. However, both said they had no plans to forget their humble beginnings. And that takes us back to the company's emphasis on community involvement.

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On its Web site, the company says, "While IMS has offices in several states, we are also a local firm to each community we serve, and we have a genuine interest in each community's unique needs."

IMS puts these words to action in a number of ways, not the least of which is its own youth program that currently serves 400 children. Calhoun recounted how IMS took approximately 70 kids to Huntsville, Ala., to the NASA facility, followed by a football game. He pointed out how this and other programs are broadening children's horizons, helping to ensure that they are afforded every opportunity to succeed in life. But he was also quick to say that, while IMS motives are predominately selfless, there is a benefit to the company's bottom line from its philanthropic efforts.

"Where am I going to get my civil engineers of tomorrow? Where are the taxpayers going to come from who will pay the taxes so we can design new roads and other infrastructure? From these children," he said. "We are a for-profit business. We're here to make money, make no mistake. We believe in helping those in the community because we feel obligated, but it's a win-win."

Still, IMS has even bigger future plans. Calhoun called IMS' expansion strategy "aggressive," and he sees IMS going from a significant regional firm to a full-blown national player in the next five years. But he plans to do it the IMS way.

"We want to take what has made us successful here in Jackson and plug that into the other communities we serve," he said. "Pay attention and work hard."