

Creating a safe harbor for computers: Westborough's Clear Sailing helps small businesses with their high-tech needs

By Bob Tremblay

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Small- and mid-sized companies wary of navigating the frequently rough seas of high technology might want to set a course for Clear Sailing Inc.

The Westborough company provides computer and network consulting, systems integration and administration, accounting and reporting systems, installation, Internet consulting and computer training for firms whose tech staff isn't large enough to populate the QEII.

The company works with owners of small and mid-sized businesses to get the most from their computer networks and software, as well as providing troubleshooting and capacity planning for current and future needs.

"Big companies have the money and resources to take advantage of the technology that is available today," says Rick Butler, Clear Sailing's founder, president and CEO. "But smaller businesses are still waiting for the benefits in efficiency and workflow that they have been promised.

"There is a real need for somebody who can help a smaller business get more from their computer investment. The cost of technology continues to decrease (yet) many smaller companies are unaware of the power that's available to them and how to exploit this power wisely."

That's where Clear Sailing cruises into the picture. Started three years ago, originally in Waltham, the company was created to meet this need. "We typically help in two ways," says Butler. "A company may say, 'Look, we've got problems with this or that. Can you come in and help us?' Or they say, 'We're ready to upgrade our networks. We need to take the next step.'"

And that step can be taken without falling into red ink, Butler stresses. "You have this dichotomy of really inexpensive servers and software and the need for technical talent to get it installed and get it installed properly," says Butler. "If it

doesn't go in properly, it becomes more of a source of frustration than an enabling tool."

Clear Sailing provides this talent and does so for an affordable price, says Butler. That cost depends on the services provided. While not getting into specifics, Butler notes that small business server software for an office with five people can cost as low as \$1,300.

One of the companies Clear Sailing assisted was an advertising agency in which employees worked on different computer systems. "What happens very frequently is these systems exist in separate networks so the employees can't communicate well together," says Butler. "What we'll do is get in there and put in the software, the servers or whatever's necessary, so it's transparent to the users, whether they're working on Apples or Windows PCs, that they've got access to the same information, they're using the same data and they're using the same e-mail programs.

"What you want to do is enable people to use the equipment they're most comfortable with yet allow them to communicate with all the other people, and that's what we did. They're now sharing information and they can easily e-mail one another. This agency, which previously had two opposing camps, is now working together. All the frustrations have been defused."

Clear Sailing also assists accounting and law firms with communicating sensitive material in a secure fashion.

"At these firms, typically smaller ones, their e-mail server is outside on an Internet Service Provider, so if a lawyer or accountant at one end of the building wants to send some confidential client information to another co-worker at the other end, he's got to send that stuff out over the unsecured public Internet," says Butler. "That's really not the way to do it. So when we see this situation, we suggest our clients install an internal e-mail server so when they're communicating with one another inside the office, this confidential client information is not going outside on that unsecured public Internet.

"Many law and accounting firms, when they discover what they've been doing, are somewhat taken aback. They don't realize how they're exposing information out to the Internet."

Though many companies offer high-tech assistance, few have backgrounds in business, notes Butler. "Hal (Petersen, Clear Sailing's vice president) and I both have technical knowledge and practical experience working in the business world, academia and laboratories," says Butler. "In addition to being a Microsoft certified systems engineer, I have owned a \$9 million distribution business and been CFO of the divisions of several large and small companies. Hal has a Ph.D. in chemistry and is the former director of Information Technology at Clark

University. So we are adept at helping businesses to use computers as productive tools that can really help solve problems and meet business challenges....

"We started as business people, not technicians, and our business experience gives us an edge. Let me use this analogy: If a carpenter builds a house and the house falls down, you don't blame the hammer. Computers are basically a tool. That's the way we look at (it) so we'll sit down and review issues with clients. We go above and beyond plugging in wires and installing software."

Even the company's title reflects its different approach. "I had searched a title for some time and most of the titles involve the words 'Solutions' or 'Computers,'" Butler recalls. "I wanted to suggest that we were doing something a little bit more than installing computers or we were computer geeks. We believe computers are basically a tool to help businesses, organizations and laboratories accomplish their objectives so their work proceeds smoothly and the outcome is clear sailing for them."

The company has established a client base of 10 so far with its volume of business doubling each year, according to Butler. Its typical client operates up to 50 computers.

"Many of these smaller companies can't afford full-time computer support," says Butler. "That's where we come in, we're affordable....We help companies get the most from their computer investment."

That statement is in keeping with the company's slogan -- delivering on the promise of technology.

CLEAR SAILING INC.

Founder: Rick Butler

Employees: 2

Revenue: Not revealed

Industry: Consulting services and computer systems support

Company background: Clear Sailing Inc. is a Westborough company that provides computer systems, networks and support for small- and medium-sized businesses. Its Web site address is www.clearsailing.com.

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