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Baycom marks 50 years on the leading edge



Dan Pohlman, owner of Baycom, is shown with a photo of his father, Thomas W. Pohlman, who founded the business 50 years ago. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

Founded in 1956, it bases its success on being a technology leader

By Jaime Leick

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First there was the lunchbox. Then the brick.

These are nicknames for early portable radio systems — equipment serviced by Baycom when both the technology and the company were in their infancy.

Today, two-way radios are much smaller in size, and technology is rapidly changing the way we communicate. For Baycom Inc., Green Bay which celebrated its 50th anniversary in this month, success has always meant keeping ahead of the times.

Standing in front of a display of historical radio equipment, director of technical services Ollie Toms picked up a portable radio that used vacuum tubes instead of a transistor. The 1959 model was larger than a lunchbox and had a traditional telephone handset on top.

“To have a radio that you could carry around and talk on was just phenomenal,” Toms said. “That was very cutting edge.”

Senior account executive Steven Elias demonstrated a later model from the 1970s. Dubbed “the brick” for both its size and heft, Elias says police officers didn’t bother pulling out their batons when the sizable radio was already in hand.

Although the company was originally established in 1954 under the name Electronic Service, Baycom marks its anniversary as September 12, 1956 — the day its founder, Thomas Pohlman signed a service agreement

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with Motorola. Bay Communications was incorporated that same year.

Pohlman worked as an engineer for WTAQ and WBAY, and it’s a source of pride at Baycom that its founder was instrumental in putting Green Bay’s first television station on the air.

Pohlman ran his service business on the side, out of his basement. His wife Eunice shared her early memories:

“I had a two-way radio on the cupboard and I would relay the calls to Tom,” she said. “Then [the business] got so big there wasn’t room in the house anymore.”

Eunice Pohlman said her husband’s employers were surprised that he would give up a stable job and risk the fluctuating income of an entrepreneur.

“They said, ‘You’re going to leave this job and not know if you’re going to have a paycheck every week?’” she said. “But it worked out OK.”

Today, Baycom has nearly 40 employees and annual revenues of \$10 million.

Pohlman was active in the business until 1992 when his son Dan took over company leadership. He passed away in November 2005, less than a year shy of the company’s 50th anniversary.

“My one biggest disappoint is that he’s not around to witness our event,” said Dan Pohlman.

The company moved out of the basement in 1966 to what is now the Commercial Auto Body building on east Mason Street in Green Bay. They expanded that facility twice before moving to their current headquarters at 2040 Radisson Street in 1982.

At that time the company was still operating exclusively as a Motorola service center. In 1988, Motorola changed its sales structure and began hiring outside distributors.

Dan Pohlman marks that as one of the major milestones in the company’s history.

“We had to grow a sales force real fast,” he said. “I would guess it more than doubled our size.”

In 1988 and 1993, Baycom opened additional locations in Neenah and Marinette respectively.

Since then, the company has grown its Motorola line and added other products as well.

“We’re a wireless solutions provider,” said Al Koivisto, director of sales and marketing.

Baycom’s products include two-way radio systems, paging, cellular, and wireless

broadband products. It provides both voice and data transmission to commercial, industrial, and residential customers throughout northeast Wisconsin.

The Green Bay Police Department was one of its first customers, and public safety is an area the company still specializes in today.

Baycom maintains the 911 communication systems for several Northeastern Wisconsin counties and equips area squad cars with everything from the siren and light bar to the gun lock and cages. They also sell Panasonic Toughbooks, a heavy-duty laptop typically used by law enforcement, fire fighters, and other mobile professionals who require durable electronic equipment.

Toms said that the company’s emphasis on the public safety sector is a big motivator for many employees.

“We all take pride in that,” he said. “It’s purposeful work. It’s rewarding.”

For the future, Koivisto said that wireless broadband products such as WiFi, WiMAX, VoIP, and video surveillance would continue to be an emphasis.

“We’ve been in the wireless industry for 50 years,” he said. “Our focus is to stay in the forefront and be leading edge in technology.”

A representative from Motorola, on hand to recognize Baycom’s achievement, indicated that the company’s longevity was a testimony to its continued technological advancements.

“It’s not only a milestone, it’s a statement,” he said. “Do they look 50 years old? Absolutely not.”