

## Expertise He Can Take To the Bank

By DAVE SIMANOFF  
The Tampa Tribune

THONOTOSASSA - Tony Coleman works with a lot of start-up companies. His is not one of them.

Coleman is the guy people call when they want to open a new bank somewhere in the Southeast. Coleman's 13-year-old AaSys Group provides the technical support, services and operational expertise needed for a new bank, which lets the founders focus on the financing.

The company also provides a host of other services to the banking industry. As an established firm with 50 employees and a brand new headquarters building on U.S. 301 here, AaSys bears little resemblance to the upstart systems networking and marketing firm that Coleman, a Xerox veteran, started in Sarasota in 1994. (Coleman said the AaSys name doesn't mean anything, but he has discovered two important advantages over the years: It always lands at the top of alphabetical listings, and it's pronounced exactly like the word "aces.")

When Coleman sat down to talk to The Tampa Tribune late last month, pictures had been hung in the new offices, but the paint - pale yellow, the color of expensive resume paper - still smelled new. Coleman, 54, described how AaSys evolved from a jack-of-all-trades start-up to a specialized midsized firm, what his goals are and what other people can learn from his firm's experiences.

Q. AaSys started as a networking systems company. How did it become specialized in the banking industry?

A. We weren't in a specific market - we did anything that would pay the bills. At one point, we did work for Hops restaurants; we did work for Brown & Brown insurance; we did engineering firms. In 1998, I had two very large customers, SunTrust Bank of Florida and Chase Manhattan Bank. With those two, I discovered ... we had something we didn't know we had: a knowledge of how banks operated. To be honest, I didn't realize it. A customer realized it. The president of a bank said, "You know, with what you know about banks, you should only offer your services to banks." I came home, I did my research, and thought about it. A few months later, I came to my staff and said we were going to switch our whole business plan.

Q. When that customer pointed out AaSys' strengths in banking, was it an epiphany?

A. It was a skeptical epiphany. If thought, if [the company] is too vertical, then what happens in a bad economy? That's why I did my research.

Q. What's the lesson here for other people in business?

A. If someone today were going into business, the first thing I would say is write your business plan, but keep it flexible and fluid. It's not a masterpiece. It's a work in progress. Look and listen for your opportunity to find your niche, because that's what we did.

Q. What's AaSys' biggest challenge right now?

A. The biggest challenge is finding talent. It's a challenge because we're so specialized, and we've got to get people that understand what we're talking about. When we look for those kinds of credentials, it becomes tougher. When I got started, I could train a generalist to get to where I wanted. We're past that point now.

Q. Where will you be five years from now?

A. Currently, AaSys is in six states. Our headquarters is here, and we're in South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia. The next step is to grow in such a way that we have the same kind of footprint in those other states that we have now in Florida. There are 300 community banks in Florida, and we probably have 150 of those as customers. The challenge is going to be people, people, people.

Q. Now that you're well past your start-up days, it is easier to borrow money?

A. It's a little easier. When you're just getting started, you go to a bank and say, "Give me a line of credit," and they say, "Come back when you grow up." Well, now I'm mature, I have the financials, and I have the track record. Banks will look at me and say, "Oh yeah, OK, we'll be happy to work with you." The most difficult thing is to not take too much credit from the banks.

Q. How will you know when you've reached your goals?

A. It will be difficult. I set the bar higher every day. My goal for one year may be a revenue goal. It may be a knowledge goal for my employees. I don't have a set goal - one where I can say, "OK, I've made it, so I can relax now." I think the guy who does say that is in trouble. Once you don't want to be part of the hunt, you may as well go ahead and retire.

Q. What's one of the biggest challenges you've faced personally as your company has grown?

A. One of my weaknesses was I didn't realize when to let go. As a young business person, I did a lot - I did the billing; I put equipment together; I made deliveries; I made sales calls. I didn't realize when to stop. Three years ago, we started the process of me turning over those responsibilities to my vice presidents and other employees.

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