

ENTERPRISE

Entrepreneur Finds Monks Make Heavenly Employees

Small Data-Services Firm Says Customers Are Flocking to Its Doors

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A Virginia entrepreneur has found a way to please both God and Mammon, with the help of some hardworking monks. Ed Leonard founded Electronic Scriptorium Ltd. in April 1992. The company farms out data-services projects to monasteries and, so far, it looks like a match made in heaven.

Electronic Scriptorium's customers say they like its reasonable prices and trust the monks to handle sensitive information with discretion. With other sources of income dwindling, the monasteries say they can use the extra money.

And Mr. Leonard has managed to turn a profit, with the help of his nearly perfect employees. "They're never late, rarely absent, and there's no drug problem," he says.

"When we had this idea, the response was phenomenal," he says. "Customers were giving us work faster than the monasteries could decide whether it was something they wanted to do." (Though he won't specify earnings, he says he expects revenue to approach \$750,000 in 1993, the company's first full year of operation.)

As Electronic Scriptorium's brief history makes clear, an entrepreneur doesn't have to come up with a dazzling new idea to start a company. Sometimes, figuring out how to excel at just one aspect of the operation can give a business a solid

advantage. A restaurant is likely to thrive no matter what its menu if it finds the right location. And any company will get a jump on the competition if it can recruit a work force that is smart, industrious and clean-living.

Mr. Leonard first worked with monks at Holy Cross Abbey, a Cistercian community in Berryville, Va., where he updated the computer system for its mail-order fruit-cake business. At the time he was an employee at Dun & Bradstreet Corp. and was helping the monastery as a favor.

In the process, he formed a friendship with Brother Benedict Simmonds, a former librarian with contacts at several university libraries, including Yale and Johns Hopkins. From Brother Benedict, he learned that some of the libraries were looking for help in entering printed records into computers. After getting the blessing of the monks and their abbot, Electronic Scriptorium was born, and Holy Cross receives a percentage of the company's profits. The monks there and at other abbeys are paid by the piece (about \$10 an hour) and turn over their wages to the monastery.

In its 15 months of existence, the company has developed projects with three monasteries, and some of its 11 office employees pick up the slack in busy periods. It has also received inquiries from several other monasteries, including a few in Europe and Latin America.

So far, university libraries have been the most enthusiastic customers, partly because of the strong traditional links between monasticism and scholarship. Holy Cross Abbey transferred 10,000 manual-card catalog records to computer for the Cross Campus Library at Yale University. "It takes us back full circle to the

days of handwritten library work," says Don Waters, Yale's director of systems.

Two monks at Gethsemani Abbey in New Haven, Ky., developed an index for the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions Archives. Nancy McCall, Johns Hopkins archivist, said the monks' integrity was a selling point. "They're discreet about handling sensitive and confidential work," she says.

Indeed, the collective brainpower of its workers gives Electronic Scriptorium an edge over other data-services companies, according to Library Corp., an Inwood, W. Va., company that sells data-management software to libraries. Library Corp. employs Electronic Scriptorium to help automate libraries in preparation for its software. "The quality control is far, far superior," says Mark Wilson, Library Corp.'s director of data processing. "I don't think you usually get Ph.D.'s typing catalog information."

While Electronic Scriptorium's competitors are much larger, the company may be able to develop a niche in academic library work. "Academics are a little more demanding and require more skill," says Wanda Bower, assistant manager of conversion for Brodard Co. of Williamsport, Pa. Gary Houk, vice president of services for OCLC Online Computer Library Center Inc. of Columbus, Ohio, says "as long as they're price competitive, they can certainly stake out an area for themselves."

Working with a monastery does place certain constraints. Electronic Scriptorium is selective about the work it accepts, and Mr. Leonard says he avoids jobs with high-pressure deadlines or "where there's no humanistic value." For example, he says, the company probably

wouldn't do data-entry projects for credit-card companies.

Many monasteries have had problems finding work that is both appropriate and profitable. Cloistered monasteries, which cannot run schools or work with parishes, have traditionally supported themselves through agricultural work. However, says Sister Catherine Quinn, co-vicar for religious of the Archdiocese of New York: "It is becoming more difficult because it's like a cottage industry. They're in competition with large producers."

Some monasteries devote themselves to making vestments, candles and altar breads, but, Sister Catherine asks, "How many customers do you have?"

Brother Ron Pickarski, a Franciscan friar based in Florida, says the future of monasteries lies in entrepreneurship. "The ones that survive into the 21st century [will be] those that enter into the business community and really earn their daily bread," he says.

Persuading monasteries to try a radical business strategy hasn't been easy. "We lead the kind of life in which change is looked at very carefully before plunging forward," Brother Benedict says. And working for private companies "is a very new idea."

But Mr. Leonard predicts that change will come. And, others say, there is ample precedent for that. "There is some leftover romanticism," that resists bringing modern technology into monastic life, says Brother Benjamin of Gethsemani. But there is a long tradition, he adds, of monasteries "using to the best advantage what's available to society and sort of baptizing it along the way."



Ed Leonard