

REPORT

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Shelter contract buoys NY firms

Big Spanish outfit turns to locals to build and set up bus stops

BY WENDY DAVIS

SIX YEARS after a recession and terrorists struck, putting A&L Sheet Metal Fabrications Co. into a multiyear tailspin, business is booming again—thanks to just one contract.

Late last year, the Queens outfit was chosen to be one of the companies to build and install bus shelters throughout the city. It has since expanded its staff by a third, to 60.

"This is a better year than we've ever had," says A&L founder and Chief Executive Anatoly Lekhter.

The 12-year-old outfit is one of three small companies that are benefiting from a deal that New York cut last year with outdoor-advertising giant Cemusa. After years of negotiations, the city agreed to let the Spanish company install, maintain, and sell ads on 3,300 sleek glass-and-steel bus shelters. In return, Cemusa will pay the city \$1 billion over the life of the 20-year contract.

As part of the deal—which includes 330 newsstands and 20 public toilets—Cemusa com-

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DARRYL STOVALL SR., D&S Electrical Corp. 17



STACEY BENDET, Alice + Olivia 17



JAMES SIMINOFF, SimulScribe Inc. 18

New York's Top Entrepreneurs

THE HALF A DOZEN WINNERS of *Crain's* 12th annual small business awards come from across the city, from Far Rockaway in Queens to Canal Street in lower Manhattan. Each exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit that helps drive the city's economy, providing a stream of fresh ideas and jobs.

The business owners honored in the following pages were chosen by a panel of *Crain's* editors from scores of nominees submitted by readers as well as the paper's staff.

The winners include a wildly successful dress designer now slipping into shoes, a determined union electrician in Queens who quit to launch a contracting firm, and the maker of technology that turns voice mails into text.

Rounding out the list are an innovative brother-and-sister glass manufacturing team, an award-winning park designer, and a young man who turned his mother's Indian recipes into the inspiration for a popular line of spices.



ERIC & ELLEN LATIN, Dundy Glass & Mirror 18



THOMAS BALSLEY, Thomas Balsley Associates 20



DHIRAJ ARORA, Arora Creations Inc. 20

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Readable voice mail hits the write note

Quick access to text transcriptions lures customers pressed for time

BY LISA GOFF

IF JAMES SIMINOFF hadn't been so hungry one night four years ago, he might never have hit on the idea to launch SimulScribe Inc.

A friend had put their dinner plans on hold to go through a day's worth of phone messages, musing aloud that he wished someone would invent a way for people to eyeball their voice mail instead of having to listen to it all.

"I was starving, so I just said, 'Yeah, I think I could do that; can we eat now?'" says Mr. Siminoff.

Later, he became so intrigued by the idea—and by the size of the business opportunity—that within three months, he had resigned as the partner of a telephone card company and launched SimulScribe. He was determined to turn the notion into a marketable reality. In the end, the project took more than two years.

Now, SimulScribe is among the

top businesses in the fledgling industry. *PC World* made it official in June, anointing the company "leader of the pack" among voice-to-text providers.

SimulScribe's status is drawing a crowd. The company already has more than 10,000 individual customers, a number that is growing at a blistering pace of 9% a week. Several local telecom service providers, including Vonage and M5, offer the service, and a major carrier, which Mr. Siminoff would not disclose, recently signed up to test it.

Revenues for this year are projected to hit \$1 million. So far, Mr. Siminoff hasn't spent a dime on marketing, relying instead on word of mouth and product reviews. He predicts that sales will balloon to \$3 million per month by the end of next year. In anticipation, he recently hired four executives away from Motorola, bringing his total number of staffers to 15; eight are in Manhattan, with the rest in London, San Diego and Boston.

SimulScribe delivers transcrip-

tions of voice mails within two minutes and saves them in a searchable database for up to 18 months. At \$9.95 a month for up to 40 messages and 25 cents for each additional message, SimulScribe isn't cheap, but customers love it.

"SimulScribe is addictive," says Adam Eiseman, chief executive of Manhattan-based outsourcing firm Lloyd Group. "It's the crack cocaine of telecom technology."

The no-voice choice

THE SERVICE has proved especially popular with people who suffer from hearing difficulties; Mr. Siminoff provides SimulScribe to such individuals at no charge. Several companies, including accounting firm Ernst & Young, offer the service to their hearing-impaired staffers.

The company is the fourth that Mr. Siminoff has launched. He founded his first, an electronics distributor, while he was studying for his undergraduate degree in entrepreneurship at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass. He later started a business plan consulting firm and an Internet telecom company.

Mr. Siminoff says that developing the technology behind SimulScribe was his toughest entrepre-



MAIL-PATTERN BALDNESS: James Siminoff stated that he could create voice-to-text technology so that he could get to dinner.

SIMULSCRIBE INC.

BUSINESS PLAN He wrote a 3-page plan in 2005 and has never revised it; he revises his strategic plan daily.

LAST TIME HE TOOK 2 WEEKS OFF In 1997, as a college junior, he went to Bermuda.

BEST THING ABOUT NYC "New Yorkers are willing to pay to save time, and that's what our business is all about."

WORST THING ABOUT NYC The cost of office space.

PROUDEST MOMENT "When I found out my favorite player on my favorite football team, the New England Patriots, was a customer."

IN 5 YEARS ... Voice-mail-to-text services will be as pervasive as BlackBerries, and his firm will be a leader in the field.

BUCK ENNIS

neurial task to date. When he began, the average transcription technology had an accuracy rate of no better than 50%. SimulScribe has pushed the figure to between 90% and 95%.

"I was creative in thinking about the technology, and I also hired some of the best people in voice recognition to help make my creative ideas come true," says Mr. Siminoff. ■

High-tech glassmaker shatters speed records

Computerized equipment provides fast turnaround, high quality

BY CARA S. TRAGER

TAKING OVER running a century-old, labor-intensive manufacturing firm located in the heart of the nation's most congested city—not to mention the most expensive one—is not for the faint of heart.

Siblings Ellen and Eric Latin knew that when they succeeded their father at the helm of Dundy Glass & Mirror in 1990. But they also knew there were plenty of customers who would value the high quality and quick delivery they provided. They just had to try harder and be smarter than the competition.

Even the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 failed to break the Latins' focus. One month later, they flew to Milan to buy a state-of-the-art machine that can precisely cut hundreds of sheets of laminated glass a day. To accommodate the new device, they expanded their plant in

Jamaica, Queens, by a third, to 20,000 square feet. Dundy now offers clients faster delivery of laminated glass, at prices as much as 30% below the competition's.

"We can't stand still, because whatever we are doing today, our competition will be doing tomorrow," says Mr. Latin, who has a degree in electrical engineering with a specialization in computers.

Such drive has made Dundy a computerized wonder—the go-to place for sandblasted, beveled, etched, engraved and color-coated glass.

"When I am up against the wall, I can reach out to them and they will bend over backward to provide me with same-day service," says David Land, president of David Shuldiner Inc., a glass and ornamental metal contractor in Brooklyn.

The Latins' glass can be found at the jewelry counters in Bloomingdale's, in the mirrors at Radio City Music Hall, and in restaurants and retail outlets as far away as Sweden and Saudi Arabia. Their 25-employee

firm generated sales of \$2.5 million last year, up 12% from 2005 levels.

The Latins aim to do even better this year. They spent \$2.5 million in May to buy a 25,000-square-foot plant in Springfield Gardens, Queens, with 35-foot ceilings. In January, it will start churning out laminated sheets of glass as large as 11 feet by 17 feet, for use in everything from airports to storefronts. As always, the Latins will stress fast turnaround and high quality in their production.

Hey, good-looking

"IF WE CAN make our customers look good, they will get more business from their clients and we will get more business from them," says Ms. Latin, who holds a degree in business marketing and management.

By pouring nearly \$420,000 into the purchase of high-speed, computer-driven machines in the past six years, the Latins have been able to expand output while holding employment relatively steady. This has also allowed them to invest more in training, and to shift less-skilled workers whose jobs have been eliminated by automation to new warehousing and maintenance operations.

The siblings also promise to hold jobs open for employees who are sent



FAIREST OF THEM ALL: Eric and Ellen Latin aim to be dependable for clients and employees alike.

DUNDY GLASS & MIRROR

BUSINESS PLAN They have nothing in writing; plans are made over dinner and at family barbecues.

LAST TIME THEY TOOK 2 WEEKS OFF In 1995, Eric took time off for his honeymoon to Greece and Italy. Last year, Ellen took an 11-day trip to Alaska.

BEST THING ABOUT NYC Proximity to customer base.

WORST THING ABOUT NYC It's hard to make deliveries.

PROUDEST MOMENT For Eric: getting a low mortgage rate because banks were competing for Dundy's business. For Ellen: showing her children Dundy's glass and mirrors at Radio City.

IN 5 YEARS ... The firm will double plant size and staff, and triple sales.

BUCK ENNIS

to jail for nonviolent crimes. "We have been fortunate in our lives and have to give back," says Ms. Latin. She and her brother also sponsor

a second-grade boys basketball team near their Long Island homes and donate to various charities, including the American Cancer Society. ■