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Company has the touch

Round Rock touch screen manufacturer gains \$20M in deals, plots hiring spree

Mary Alice Kaspar Austin Business Journal Staff

A Round Rock-based touch screen company has landed more than \$20 million worth of deals since it launched seven months ago and plans to add nearly 70 employees.

Touch International Inc.'s most recent contract is for an Air Force project, estimated to bring the company \$1 million over the course of the three-year agreement. The company will manufacture touch screens for an air command and control center.

Touch International manufactures touch screen displays and components. Such technology can be found in a number of industries and devices — ranging from medical equipment to appliances. Users simply press a screen and software determines the selection.

While its headquarters are in Round Rock, Touch International also operates a manufacturing plant in Hutto. Additionally, it has arranged exclusive manufacturing agreements with Data Mate in Japan and eTurboTouch in Taiwan.

Touch International has 10 employees in Round Rock and Hutto, but that

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number climbs to more than 500 internationally when sales and distribution representatives are included. Those representatives function like independent contractors.

The company plans to add 67 full-time employees in the Austin area by the end of 2003, Touch International CEO Michael Woolstrum says. By the end of December, it expects to employ 45 people locally. Manufacturing, engineering and sales positions will be added locally throughout the coming year.

Woolstrum says the company might add employees who have been laid off from 3M Co. subsidiary Touch Systems Inc.

In July, 3M announced its intentions to shut down the Austin manufacturing operation by December, eliminating 32 jobs.

The new employees will also create real estate needs, Woolstrum says. He says the company has allocated \$950,000 for factory build-out and office space expenses between now and mid-2003.

The company launched with an undisclosed amount of funding from three principals in February. It is currently seeking \$3 million to \$5 million in additional venture funding to help the company expand by improving its facilities, technology and increase sales and marketing efforts.

A City of Round Rock representative says Touch International's growth plans come at a good time.

"We're always excited when one of our headquarter companies is succeeding and expanding," says Nancy Yawn, director of public affairs and business development for the City of Round Rock.

In mid-2000, the city and the Round Rock Chamber of Commerce teamed up to tap Austin's AngelouEconomics Inc. for an economic development plan. The report found Round Rock needs to diversify its economic base and become less dependent on the area's largest corporate employer, Dell Computer Corp.

"We are still very interested in high tech, but particularly sectors in high tech that show growth potential," Yawn says.

Yawn notes Touch International is making expansion plans at time when other companies aren't.

Woolstrum and an industry analyst say the touch screen industry hasn't

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been hit as hard by the economic downturn as other tech sectors because it has been able to diversify.

Over time, touch screen technology has shrunk in size — enabling it to be used in more ways, says Martin Reynolds, research fellow with Stamford, Conn.-based Gartner Inc.

Like Touch International has witnessed, Reynolds says the military has increased its spending on touch screen technology.

Reynolds says the advantage to winning military contracts is that they tend to be high-margin deals. Also, he says, the military tends to imbed the technology for a number of years — so contracts can last for a long time.

While the company itself is a relative newcomer in the industry, the trio in charge have each garnered at least a decade's worth of experience. Woolstrum, the CEO, has more than 10 years of industry experience. He previously served as president and CEO of touch screen manufacturer TouchSystems and director of worldwide resistive services for MicroTouch Systems. MicroTouch Systems was later sold to 3M and called Touch Systems. It is the subsidiary 3M intends to shut down by December.

The two other principals are:

- Bob Senior, managing director, Europe, Middle East, and Africa. Senior also has 10 years of industry experience, previously working as managing director and vice president of MicroTouch Systems.
- Gary Barrett, chief technology officer. Barrett's roots in the industry date back to 1981. He has held executive staff/director positions at Touch Technology, Carroll Touch [now part of Elo TouchSystems], Gunze Corp. and The Graphics Technology Co. Barrett holds five key patents related to touch sensing technology.

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