

EYE ON THE ENTREPRENEUR

Before his time

Lew Dixon came up with a business plan well ahead of its time; tragically, he and his son died before their time, leaving the business to his youngest son

In 1977, Lew Dixon opened a little gas station in Mount Airy. His idea was that people would want to track their gas usage. Subscribers would get a key they could put in the gasoline pump and a computer would monitor their gasoline usage. Business was okay, but it took more than a year before he



By Neil R.G. Young

was able to sell a truckload of gasoline in a month.

Dixon was every bit the engineer and detail person. He joined the Army Air Corps in 1944 and was sent to flight school where he was trained as a flight engineer and top turret gunner on B-17s. The Army, which is famous for testing people, determined that he had very strong engineering skills. This definitely proved to be the case, as he and his buddies learned all kinds of imaginative ways to keep the lumbering bombers flying, even in the worst weather.

After the war, Dixon, armed with a lot of mechanical skills, enrolled at North Carolina State University, majoring in mechanical engineering. For the next 20 years, Dixon worked in government. Along the way, he and his wife had two sons, Gurney and Mark. When they started their gas station, Gurney worked with his dad in their hardware store. Mark, Dixon's younger son, was working in Oklahoma, in the "oil patch," as a truck dispatcher and sometimes driving tankers.

"Dad always kept a detailed log of his gasoline usage for his car," Mark recalls. "Computers for small businesses were getting into the affordable range, and Dad, always the engineer, assumed that everyone would want to keep detailed gasoline records as prices went up. His idea was to start a gasoline club, and that brought about the birth of the gasoline station in Mount Airy in 1977."

Within a few years, Lew Dixon began to have bigger ideas for his "gas club." He began to realize that as gas prices continued to rise, corporations and even the government could save money if they could only monitor their fuel usage. Lew believed that fuel sites could be networked together to provide an accurate picture of fueling costs and habits and to improve economies of scale. His research proved that no state government had implemented any such plan.

Lew and his son, Gurney, began to move their company, which they named **Commercial Fuel**

Systems, into the broader arena of remotely monitoring gasoline usage for government.

A few years later, Mark and his wife decided to move east from Oklahoma to be closer to the family. Since he knew trucking, Mark took a job with a trucking company in Virginia, but several years later, came to work with his father and brother.

"I was always fascinated with computers and relational databases," Mark recounts. "It was as though everything seemed to be in preparation for my coming to Mount Airy to work in the family business. Once there, I took over the delivery system — getting fuel to the various sites around the state. I began designing relational databases so we could track everything."

The Dixons had a nice little business. They were helping the state of Maryland save millions of dollars on their fuel usage. They weren't making a lot of money at it, but they were happy doing a job they all loved. Finally, they realized that their contract was coming up for re-bid, and they needed to make sure their numbers were correct. As any contractor knows, underbidding any job can put you out of business in a real hurry.

Gurney was responsible for the re-bid for the state contract. Then, one day in early 1997, the Dixons' whole world turned upside down.

"Gurney came into my office one morning," recalls Mark, "and dumped a stack of papers on my desk. He hadn't been looking well, and I knew he was tired. He said, 'Mark, you're going to have to negotiate this. I'm going into chemotherapy.'"

This was Mark's trial by fire. His father had been slowly turning operations over to Gurney, as he was now well

into his 70s. No one had ever thought of Mark running the company. Mark had to take everything Gurney and his father had put together and negotiate a new contract with the state, while still being the low bidder. In early 1998, Gurney died of a fast-moving virulent form of cancer.

"Dad was 76 when Gurney died," recalls Mark. "He weathered it really well — at least in front of us. Little did we know that he was battling another form of cancer. He'd never told us."

Lew Dixon died a year later, leaving Mark in control of the company, with a new state contract and an overwhelming sense of responsibility to get things right.

"We never had a transition plan or what some people now refer to as a succession plan," Mark admits. "We'd never really thought about it. I just picked up the pieces

and moved on."

Commercial Fuel was able to keep the contract and has continued to save the state of Maryland millions of dollars by monitoring gasoline usage at sites all over the state. In addition, by working with fuel transportation companies, Dixon always makes sure that fuel is delivered where and when it's needed.

"If there's a blizzard, we can make sure that there are tankers on their way to make sure the snow plows have fuel to do their work," Mark Dixon says proudly.

He has worked hard to maintain a high level of service with the state as well as with his fuel suppliers. He is very proud of the fact that during recent fuel shortages after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, prior planning had insured an ample supply until the situation normalized.

He decided to diversify and has negotiated with a number of coun-

ties to help monitor their fuel usage.

He does this with a loyal staff of employees in his office in Mount Airy.

It was nearly 30 years ago that Lew Dixon opened his little "gasoline club." The idea of tracking fuel usage when gas was less than \$1 a gallon might not have interested a lot of people, but in light of what we've seen in the last two years, Commercial Fuel Systems provides a valuable service and Lew Dixon was an entrepreneurial visionary.

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