

BEST PRACTICES: Telecom business works to beat odds in industry

By RUTH BAUM BIGUS
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Robert and Linda Bennett, owners of Commworld of Kansas City, an interconnect company at 6200 Main St., in Grandview, added a global positioning system to vehicles to make more efficient use of technicians' time.

Delores Johnson/The Kansas City Star

- **The company:** **Commworld** of Kansas City is an interconnect company. As such, the company sells, installs and services business telephone systems, voice mail and related products. Commworld specializes in serving small to mid-sized businesses including medical practices and retail stores. Clients include **Superior Chevrolet**, the **Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Association** and **Cushing Memorial Hospital** in Leavenworth.
- **Telephone:** (816) 763-1100
- **Address:** 6200 Main St., Grandview, MO 64030
- **Web site:** www.commworld-kc.com
- **Ownership, top management:** Bob and Linda Bennett own the company, with Bob serving as president and Linda as vice president. Commworld's vice president of systems engineering is Curt Wiens and the operations manager is Cindy Harries.
- **Employees:** About 20
- **Challenge:** Maintaining business in a cyclical market
- **Background:** In business in the area since 1981, Commworld has experienced the ups and downs of the telecommunications industry. In line with a recent trend in the industry, Commworld began to see a drop in its sales.

"It was significant," said Linda Bennett of the sales drop. "Customers have been putting things off and just making do. They weren't adding or making any changes."

Bennett and her husband watched as their competitors also were hard hit.

"We saw that our competitors were weaker than we had

ever seen them before," Bennett said. The couple viewed the situation as an opportunity.

"The best defense was the best offense, so we decided to take the opportunity to grow," she said.

• **Action:** One of the first things the Bennetts did was join the **Technology Assurance Group**, an organization that provides networking and best practices for its members. After joining, Commworld adapted its new sales approach, which resulted in several salespeople leaving the company. The Bennetts hired a new sales force and trained members in the new sales approach.

With a downturn in work, the company's technicians were not very busy.

"Instead of laying off people, we brought our technicians in and did more cross-training on our products with them," Bennett said.

The Bennetts also looked at time-management issues. They looked into ways to make more efficient use of their technicians' time on various jobs and found technology could help them.

"We added global positioning systems to our vehicles so we know where our techs are, can dispatch them more quickly and provide faster service to our customers," Linda Bennett said.

A renewed emphasis was placed on customer service. The company calls on existing clients to gauge their satisfaction and to answer questions.

"Our operations manager calls after service calls to make sure their needs are met," she said.

Through their membership in the Technology Assurance Group, the Bennetts now are offering an extended warranty on the products they sell.

• **Results:** "By focusing on customer service, additional training for technicians and more efficient use of their time, Commworld is beginning to see an increase in its sales, but it's a slow process," Linda Bennett said. The company is able to dispatch its technicians faster, and that makes customers happy, she added. And Commworld has avoided laying off any employees despite the downturn in the marketplace.

Linda Bennett said she has found the follow-up calls the staff is making very informative.

"It's giving me a good feel for what's happening with our company," she said. "We're still in business and still profitable in an industry where some are not, and that's positive."