



Time to ACT!

Consultant Helps People and Offices Get Organized

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

Tom Najemy discovered the customer relationship software program ACT! while running a venture booking up-and-coming bands. He eventually decided that he liked the consulting business more than the entertainment world, and thus formed a company that helps a wide range of businesses use ACT! to become better organized.

Tom Najemy says the story behind the naming of his company has both a short and a long version. Squad 16, he said, was the name given the Lebanese Special Police Force, which he remembered fondly from his youth growing up in that Middle Eastern Country while his father served as a dean at American University in Beirut. He recalls one of the officers giving him a ride on his motorcycle. The longer version involves the Copeland family and brothers Stewart, Miles, and Ian, who were all involved with the rock band *The Police* and who Najemy became acquainted with dating back to his days in Lebanon. Stewart was the drummer with the band, which broke up in the mid-80s, while Ian was the booking agent and Miles was the manager. The brothers borrowed the names of government or law enforcement agencies for their ventures - Ian had a booking agency called FBI (Frontier Booking International), while Miles had a management company called LAPD (Local Area Personal Direction) and a record label called IRS (International Record Syndicate). "In the tradition of the Copelands, I stole my name from another authority figure," said Najemy, referring to the first ; venture to carry the name Squad 16 - a company that booked fledgling bands and got its start finding venues for a group featuring Najemy's brother in law. As he said, that's the long version.

The story Najemy likes telling more is that of the other name with which he is associated - ACT! That's a customer relationship software (CRM) program used by a wide range of businesses to better organize everything from schedules to sales. Najemy first used ACT! for his booking business (Squad 16 Entertainment). ACT! helped him with the daunting task of trying to keep track of a client list that eventually included more than 20 artists and 3,000 possible locations, mostly colleges where the groups can

gain much-needed exposure. He did well with the business, but confided that booking bands trying to make names for themselves is difficult - "colleges don't want unknown bands; they want known bands, but then they don't have the money to pay for them." And as he was doing business as a booking agent for bands, he was becoming quite proficient with ACT! and soon became an unofficial consultant with the product, providing assistance to others in the entertainment field.

Eventually, he decided to make ACT! his business, and created Squad 16 Consulting Inc. He started in a small office in Wilbraham, and soon moved to larger quarters on Shaker Road in East Longmeadow. He now has more than 40 clients, ranging from the Amherst-based public radio station WFCR to the minor league baseball team the Norwich Navigators. Najemy has recorded steady, double-digit growth since he started Squad 16 Consulting in 2000 upon becoming a certified consultant with the product, and expects to continue that pattern as ACT! is continually improved and more business owners discover its many benefits.

Expanding Organization

When asked what ACT! is and how it works, Najemy was clear and direct: "It's about getting organized." First introduced in 1985, thus making it one of the older CRM products, ACT!, in its latest format, is intended for groups of up to 10 users and can manage up to 50,000 contacts. (ACT! 2005 Premium can accommodate up to 50 users and handle 100,000 contacts). The program enables companies and individuals to do more than just keep a data base, said Najemy. "ACT! is about not just being reactive to a market, but being proactive," he explained. "It's primarily a sales tool, but it's also a marketing tool - a depository for phone numbers, a history of all your conversations with clients, and there is a scheduling capability; it's a wonderful tool for business."

Najemy found ACT! to be useful with keeping track of the many bands he booked while operating Squad 16 Entertainment, few of which made it to the big time. That stop was one of many in a colorful career that has taken him to many spots on the globe and several different business pursuits.

Born in Worcester, Najemy and his family moved to Lebanon in 1958 when his father took the job as dean of American University. (He was one of two deans killed during a protest in 1976). Najemy attended both high school and college in Beirut, with a short stint with the U.S. Navy in between. Upon graduation from college he eventually took work representing British and American publishers out of Athens, Greece, a job that took him across the Middle East and North Africa and cities ranging from Baghdad to Istanbul.

After doing that for three years, he ran a bookshop in Tehran, Iran that was operated by the owner of the representation firm he worked for in Athens. He managed the store for eight months before the revolution that toppled the Shah of Iran in 1979 and two months after it. He fled the country with the assistance of an ABC news crew that was able to get a small jet in and out of the city after the airport was closed.

After returning to the U.S., he operated a firm that represented American companies trying to sell solar energy technology to countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Five years later, he shifted his focus - after taking on his brother in law's band - to representing musicians.

Soon after starting Squad 16 Entertainment he went looking for a software tool that would help him keep track of artists, schedules, and venues, and found ACT! Soon he was helping others in the industry apply the software to their specialties.

"I became pretty proficient at it," he explained. "And when I got to the point where, when I called tech support, I knew more than they did, I decided that maybe I should be doing this for a living."

"I was a little hesitant at first - that happens when, at age 50, you decide to get into the most rapidly changing business that there is," he continued. "But I was confident, and, looking back, it was the best move I ever made."

Achievements of Note

In his role as ACT! consultant, premier trainer, and value-added reseller, Najemy provides classroom instruction to a company's employees - his offices can accommodate eight workstations - and also troubleshooting work for clients across the Valley and across the country. He said the ability to use Web-X meetings enables Najemy to dial into a client's computer and thus gain direct access to problem. "It doesn't

matter if their in California or down the street, I can provide them with tech support," he said. "The notion that you have to be with someone local isn't true anymore."

Squad 16's customer list includes dozens of area businesses, and companies across a wide range of sectors, from scientific instruments to advertising agencies; insurance companies to a log home manufacturer.

ACT! can be customized for each of these users, he explained, noting that it can be used in sole proprietorships, like his own, and also huge corporations like MassMutual (another client).

One of the recent additions to the client list, the Norwich Navigators, provides an example of the depth of the product, he said, noting that it can be used for tracking everything from scheduling to travel accommodations to accounts receivable. It organizes items, he explained, and it prioritizes them.

"When I do training here, I tell people to identify their market, determine what is a lead, a customer, or prospect, and schedule their calls and activities," he said. "When they've put all this in, ACT! will essentially tell them what to do every day; for every action that people make - for every call they make - it schedules a follow-up."

Najemy told *BusinessWest* that he finds consulting work rewarding on a number of levels. His work helps companies and individuals become more efficient, he explained, and the process of learning is never-ending.

"When I was doing entertainment booking, I was learning nothing," he explained. "Here, doing this, I'm learning something every day; that's the reward of trouble-shooting."

"Sometimes, I'll get posed a question that I don't know the answer to," he continued. "I'll take their data base, put it on my network system, and test it out left and right and up and down to try to figure out what's going on. When you find an answer to these problems when no one else can, that's very rewarding."

Looking down the road, Najemy said he envisions continued growth and expansion. He is developing plans to extend his classroom instruction to the public, perhaps with introductory training and then once-a-month intermediate training.

He's also looking at bringing on additional staff - either another ACT! consultant or a network specialist - and/or aligning himself with other office consulting groups.

"That day is coming," he said, "and it's coming soon."

Closing ACT!

Looking back on his various entrepreneurial pursuits, Najemy said he enjoyed his time in entertainment, but likes life as a consultant even more.

"My degree is in philosophy," he said. "I've always felt that if I stop learning, I'm dying; here, I'm quite alive and well." ..

George O'Brien can be reached at obrien@businesswest.com