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The importance of being flexible: Bus-Tech adapts

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Bus-Tech, which is based in Burlington, manufactures and markets adapters and storage controller and network controller products. The company (www.bustech.com) was founded in 1987, and its management team has been the same for the past 15 years. Mass High Tech asked Jim O'Connor, **Bus-Tech**'s director of product marketing, about ways to look for growth.

Q. With the business of technology ever changing, what are the keys to maintaining growth?

A. It is extremely important for a small company to invest in and leverage its core competency. To us that means staying focused on mainframe I/O channel technology. When we first started in 1987 that technology was known as Bus & Tag or Parallel Channel. Those were the big 2-inch diameter cables that they made raised floors to accommodate.

Now that technology has evolved to Fibre Channel connectivity, and **Bus-Tech** needed to adapt to support it. Called the Ficon channel, it increases performance from the old Bus & Tag channels and will change the way data center infrastructure is managed. **Bus-Tech** has capitalized on this growing market and started shipping Ficon connectivity support in November.

We are also constantly looking at how the company can leverage other industry trends and bring the resulting products into the proprietary world of mainframe computing. In our early days, we built a gateway product that connected Ethernet to the mainframe channel. Today we can seamlessly connect mainframes to open-system storage systems.

With few mainframe vendors remaining, larger companies have been successful at keeping their prices for proprietary storage products considerably higher than their open-system counterparts. **Bus-Tech** has been able to leverage this price differential and build appliance type products that can greatly reduce the cost of these types of storage solutions.

Q. How do you analyze the markets for growth opportunities?

A. The trick is to look at the development challenges and advances of open-system storage that have not been leveraged into the mainframe marketplace. We look to take advantage of proven emerging technologies, such as SATA disks or disk-to-disk backup-and-restore processes. We see these technologies as opportunities because they are not being leveraged in the mainframe space.

Another example is information life-cycle management and the open-system use of storage

virtualization. Mainframe vendors have not addressed the needs of each level of information, with the appropriate storage class and satisfactory performance.

We have also seen an opportunity with eliminating expensive mainframe disks known as direct access storage devices (DASD). The majority of information stored on these disks is not critical, but users have to keep their information stored there because the applications were built on that technology. Enabling these companies to migrate and store that data off of DASD and onto open-system storage offers a significant savings opportunity for the mainframe marketplace.

Q. Looking back over Bus-Tech's 15-plus years in business, are there any changes you would make, in hindsight?

A. We would be more careful to allow technology to establish itself and not fall victim to the hype surrounding emerging technology and look beyond what the analysts are saying.

We've been burnt a few times in the past but have definitely learned from those experiences. As an ex-ample, we jumped into iSCSI, a storage networking standard, too early and made a proprietary product.

Since then we have decided that we will wait for the market to develop and mature before investing significant time and money into a proprietary product.

Again, the key is to be focused on our core technologies. We are too small of a company to make too many missteps. Once an open-systems technology is proven, then we will devote our resources toward leveraging that technology to enhance mainframe solutions.