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# GOING TO EXTREMES

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systems  
integrator  
of the year 2004

**Tech Systems' focus on fanatical client and employee satisfaction sets it apart – and ahead of the rest.**

By Karyn Hodgson, Contributing Writer

Imagine a company that takes the adage “the customer is always right” and adapts it to the integrated systems industry: If they mess up, *they* pay the customer. Imagine a company that doesn't charge for servicing a potential client so they can demonstrate their capabilities. Imagine a company that tells its employees, “you tell us what we can do to make you happier.”

Imagine all that, and you now have some insight into Tech Systems of Duluth, Ga.

Tech Systems' style isn't for everyone. But to the 72 people employed by the firm in the 13 southern states that it serves, it's a style that serves them well. And it's a large part of the reason they were chosen to be honored as *SDM's* first annual Systems Integrator of the Year.

## GETTING ITS START

Tech Systems was founded in 1987 as a division of Technical Industries, an audio/visual company. Darryl Keeler, Tech Systems' president, joined the company in 1988 to run the “Docu-cam” program. Docucam is a mobile video recording system designed for law enforcement applications. Within two years, Tech Systems had split off from Technical Industries, and by 1992 it sold Docucam to focus solely on developing and growing the integration side of the business.

Senior vice president Jerry Clark

*Getting fired by a client for poor service in 1997 forced Tech Systems – SDM's first annual Systems Integrator of the Year – to remold itself into a 100-percent service-focused business. Since that time the company has experienced significant annual revenue gains. The management team that redirected Tech Systems and will continue to steer it profitably into the future include (clockwise, from bottom center): Darryl Keeler, president; Joanne Heroux, director of marketing services; Ron Luchene, vice president; Tom Nealer, director of training and technology; David Sherman, director of sales; Guerry Bruner, vice president, national services; Ellie Long, director of operations; and Jerry Clark, senior vice president.*





Customer service is anything but ordinary at Tech Systems, as these three employees (from left) will attest: Rhonda Vance, national branch administrator; Melissa Underwood, Georgia branch administrator; and Sue Chuesattabonkot, Tennessee and Texas branch administrator.

joined the company at that time. "When I first started, all I saw was a lot of potential. It was an organization that just sort of happened. It was a bunch of guys fighting to get a business started, making all the mistakes that new businesses make."

This learning curve lasted for about five years.

"Up through 1997 essentially we would try to compete for just about any piece of business that was out there," Keeler says. "We were a fairly small company, and not very proactive about finding opportunities."

Then the company had a negative experience that turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to it, according to Keeler.

"It was a three-day weekend," Keeler recalls. "We had a client who had a problem with a camera system. They lost all the cameras on their parking deck. I talked to our guy on call, who said we didn't have to worry about it because our contract said we didn't need to respond until Tuesday [which would have been the next regular business day]."

Realizing that three days would be a long time to wait, Keeler went to see the client on Saturday to see if he could help, but by then they had identified the problem on their own and fixed it themselves.

A few weeks later the client called Tech Systems, and asked them to come in for a meeting.

"She fired us," Keeler says. "She told us she had been in a terribly vulnerable position at that point. She said, 'I know what the contract said, but instead of doing the thing right you should have done the right thing.'"

## FOCUS on the Client

Tech Systems' FOCUS (For Our Clients' Ultimate Satisfaction) program was modeled on a service program from manufacturer, Pelco, Clovis, Calif.

With a goal of developing long-term partnerships with all of their clients, FOCUS provides increased levels of benefits as clients' systems and relationship expands.

The Standard level includes quarterly maintenance inspection and system administration and a guaranteed 8-hour response time. The Select level begins when a client's system investment exceeds \$100,000, and includes monthly maintenance inspections and system administration.

At the Superior level (\$250,000 and up) the inspections become weekly and response time speeds up to four hours.

The ultimate level (over \$500,000) adds twice-a-week on-site technicians and is no charge to the client.

"For someone who has \$80,000 invested, a quarterly inspection is probably enough," Luchene says. "But someone with \$750,000 invested gets an on-site technician two times a week that they can almost treat as one of their own."

In addition, Tech Systems includes unlimited training for all of their programs. "Training is the most important service we can provide so they get the full use of the system they purchased," Luchene adds. "We guarantee 100 percent functionality, or we pay the client."

Benefits	Standard	Select	Superior	Ultimate
<b>Technical</b> 24/7 Contact with Tech Systems Backup Protection Policy System Software Upgrades Quality Assurance Audits On-Site Technician Maintenance Inspection System Administration	Quarterly As Required Quarterly Quarterly	Quarterly As Required Monthly Monthly	Quarterly Once a Week Weekly Weekly	Twice a Week Weekly Weekly Weekly
<b>Economic</b> Reliable Service System Rentals FOCUS Incentive for Additional Client CCTV System Rentals Guaranteed Response 100% System Functionality Free Recording Media Photo Backing Service Free Photo Backing Supplies	Current Rate 10% of Equipment Current Rate 8 Hours	Flat Rate 10% of Equipment Current Rate 8 Hours	Half Rate 15% Annual Purchase 8% of Equipment No Charge 4 Hours	No Charge 25% Annual Purchase No Charge 4 Hours
<b>Educational</b> Security & Risk Assessment Product/Technology Seminars Unlimited Operator Training				

\* Terms and conditions may apply. For additional information, contact your FOCUS Support Services representative at 1-800-877-TECH or visit our website at www.techsys.com

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Support Services

"She was 100 percent correct. It was an eye-opening experience. We had always perceived ourselves to be among the best service providers in town, but we were really no different than anyone else. We decided to take what had happened and turn it into something positive."

### SHIFTING 'FOCUS'

From that time on, Tech Systems vowed to change their business philosophy to be service – not sales – oriented.

"We began to measure service in hours instead of days and weeks," Keeler says. "If we weren't successful, we began to pay the client. That was the beginning of FOCUS."

FOCUS, the acronym for "For Our Clients' Ultimate Satisfaction," is one of the cornerstones of Tech Systems' current business philosophy. It was designed to guarantee that clients' expectations are always met or exceed-

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"We have the depth of a national integrator but the entrepreneurial spirit of a small company," says Tech Systems president Darryl Keeler.



ed (see "FOCUS on the Client," page 39). In essence, FOCUS is a program designed to help Tech Systems reach its goal of developing long-term partnerships with its clients. It provides escalating levels of benefits – including technical, economic, and educational – based on the clients' level of investment with Tech Systems.

"The creation of FOCUS turned us from a security integration company to a service-based company," Keeler says. "We are not a company out looking for a sale; we are looking to build relationships with our clients. It's not a list of benefits; it's a philosophy and a way of doing business."

The FOCUS program and general business philosophy are also directly responsible for the company's growth, both financially and geographically. Total revenue in year 2000 was \$5.8 million. This year it is expected to reach \$14 million, and 2005 revenue is projected at \$18 million.

"It's an attitude, not a product," says senior vice president Clark. "Delivering that attitude to customers is what has been responsible for our growth. Customers talk to each other. They want you in a place you are not currently in because they see what you have to offer and they want it. We've had to go to other states to meet their needs."

Ron Luchene, a vice president based in Raleigh, N.C., came on board in 1997 to open the first branch office.

Luchene has seen first-hand how FOCUS and the overall service-based model led to growth. "We have clients in markets that we service today coming to us and asking if we have a presence, say, in Indiana. When we say 'no,' they say we need to hire someone because they want us there."

One such client is ALLTEL, one of the largest telecommunications companies

in the country. Tech Systems was recently awarded a three-year, multi-million-dollar contract with ALLTEL (see "Timely Phone Call Leads to Contract," on facing page).

#### PRO-EMPLOYEE CULTURE

One of the main reasons FOCUS works so well is that Tech Systems' employees truly buy into the philosophy and different way of doing business.

"People don't *like* working for us," Clark says. "They either love it or hate it. Ours is a very extreme place. You need to really be into it, or it doesn't feel good at all. We have a large, core group of individuals that absolutely wouldn't work anywhere else."

Tech Systems has many employee benefits that go beyond the norm. For example, it pays half the insurance premiums not only for their employees, but also for their employees' dependents. Employees who have been with Tech Systems longer than 10 years are entitled to go to a four-day work week at full pay, as long as they get their work done.

Many of these ideas were developed by the Employee Advisory Board. "Each division or branch has an employee representative that has a telephone meeting at least once a month with a team leader to discuss what Tech Systems can do to make this a better place to work," Clark says.

"We have spent years being very radical with our approach to customer service. It finally occurred to us that we only had two assets. Our clients were one, but the other was our employees. We needed to be more radical with our employees."

The result is an employee base that will "go the extra mile" for the customers as well as for fellow employees. It's a two-way street. When an employee does something special, Tech Systems rewards them for the effort. Their STAR program allows anyone (fellow employees or even clients) to nominate an employee for doing something special. When the employee receives the award, he or she receives an engraved trophy and a day off from work. The STAR recipient also is honored with a black shirt with a gold company logo, which only STAR award recipients are allowed to wear.

When an employee reaches five STAR awards he or she receives a check for \$500.

Three of the most recent STAR award recipients earned their awards because they covered for an employee who was on call, but was visiting his father in the hospital's intensive care unit when an after-hours service call came in.

"All of these guys were settled in their homes with their families and ready to relax for the

*Many of Tech Systems' managers and technicians have been exposed to high levels of training and certification, particularly in network technologies, says president Darryl Keeler (center) with Nytee Nobles, project manager, and Tua Chailektrattanakul, manager of technical services.*





When one of Tech Systems' on-call technicians recently needed to attend to a family emergency, these three employees voluntarily stepped up one evening to meet Tech Systems' FOCUS obligation to its customer. All three (clockwise, from bottom left) will receive a STAR award: Joey Talton, field service technician; Scott Hardy, operations manager; and Bobby White, field service technician.

evening," Clark says. "None of them were on call that night and had no expectation of being called on. However, circumstances required their help for Tech Systems to meet the FOCUS obligation to its client and each of them immediately took action."

In a corporate environment dedicated to fanatical service, the STAR awards were developed to remind people that they are doing exemplary work. "There is something magical that happens. There is an ingredient that occurs just because we've created an environment where people can be their absolute best. We encourage them to do that and they do. They become people who do miraculous things," Clark says. "That's what has made us so great."

### BUILDING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

When you put together employees who are motivated to do the best they can for the client with a program like FOCUS that backs it up, the result is a tight one-on-one relationship with each and every client.

Tech Systems primarily serves corporate, health-care and manufacturing clients, Keeler notes.

"By focusing on key vertical markets, we have taken ourselves away from serving small companies like convenience stores," Keeler says. "We're focused on enterprise systems. We're trying to find opportunities that have long-term, mutually beneficial advantages to both ourselves and the client."

What separates Tech Systems from other systems integration firms?

"We have the depth of a national integrator but the entrepreneurial spirit of a small company,"

## Timely Phone Call Leads to Contract

When Jerry Parker, corporate security technical systems manager for ALLTEL, Little Rock, Ark., received a call from an East Coast integrator inquiring about a new ALLTEL construction project in his area, it turned out to be a mutually beneficial thing for both ALLTEL and the integrator.

The call was from a salesperson for Tech Systems. "He had a great demeanor over the phone – a low-key, quiet confidence. We discussed ALLTEL projects currently under construction and projects that were in planning stages in his area. I offered him the opportunity to bid two of the upcoming projects.

During the conversation the sales rep also mentioned that his company's corporate office was in Duluth, Ga. "I told him we had a large facility in that area that was proving to be a tough place for security system service providers," Parker says. "This seemed to be a perfect opportunity for Tech Systems to display their capabilities."

Not only did Tech Systems take three days to fix all the problems that ALLTEL had been having for the past two years, but Tech Systems did not charge for the service call.

"It was a unique approach that has certainly paid off for them. They will have the opportunity to recoup that many times over going forward," Parker says.

Recently, ALLTEL issued an RFP, inviting 12 vendors to participate. "The intent was to establish a vendor who would be ongoing, who could provide product advancement information to us, partner with us as we expand our security systems and to help us maintain what we already have in place," Parker says. In the end, Tech Systems was signed to a three-year national agreement.

"Our corporate procurement group handled the RFP process. I believed if I was right about Tech Systems it would work out. The FOCUS program clinched the deal."

Parker is pleased with the results. "It has not been a relationship without growing pains. But I see from Tech Systems a continued effort to improve and a desire to establish and grow the relationship towards a mutual partnership. In today's security environment the need for and the opportunity to be entrenched in a company's growth is very real."

Keeler says. "We are not driven by corporate policy. We can change and meet client requests in a very quick fashion."

In fact, the fanatical service model makes every customer need personal. "If a client called and needed a quote on Christmas day we would have someone capable and willing to do it," Keeler says. "We have determined what our best opportunities are and once we develop that relationship, there are no obstacles to that. Ever. We do whatever is necessary to make things right. If a client's system is down or has a problem, we see our own company as being in jeopardy."

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Paul Sutton (left), client service representative, and Alan Moat, project manager, proudly wear the black shirts that designate them as five-STAR-award recipients.

“That is our greatest challenge, to get in front of someone and show them it is possible to be unique in this industry. Once we do that, almost 100 percent of the time we win the opportunity with that client.”

Building customer relationships is a big part of Tech Systems’ success. But the other part is their relationship with manufacturers and fellow integrators.

“We have a person in-house that is dedicated 100 percent to technology,” Keeler says. “He is constantly evaluating new products and new opportunities. We are always looking for manufacturers that understand our service philosophy.”

Tech Systems is also a member of PSA Security Network, an exclusive member-owned organization of systems integrators which Keeler credits for being a large part of Tech Systems’ success. “We joined PSA in 1997. Other than getting fired and starting FOCUS, it’s probably the best thing that ever happened to us. We see them as essentially an outsourced extension of our company. The key benefit for us is the networking opportunities and access to the product lines.”

Like the FOCUS program, PSA has helped Tech Systems grow nationally. “The most recent growth we’ve experienced has been corporate clients we are now serving on a national basis. We are a member of 100 or so companies very much like ourselves. If I am going to do a project in Seattle, I can use a PSA affiliate there,” Keeler says.

### MEETING CHALLENGES, GOING FORWARD

One of the biggest challenges any integrator faces today is keeping up with technology.

“We have a very aggressive in-house training program,” Keeler says. We also attend as much training and certification as possible from our manufacturers.”

Employees are encouraged to seek out training and education.

“We support any further education that would benefit them in their role with us,” Clark says.

Focusing on training allows Tech Systems to stay current. It also offers an advantage in the changing customer environment.

“One of the challenges in front of us is the introduction of the IT world to security,” Keeler says. “The challenge is keeping the staff up to speed technically to begin to compete in that arena.”

Luchene agrees, but feels Tech Systems has the edge. “I think we recognized early on that the whole IT/security convergence was occurring,” he says. We got way out in front of that. We have Microsoft MCSE and CISCO (CCNA) certifications. Now we have reached a place where calling on a security director is not enough anymore. IT is involved in everything, including how a system is managed after the fact. Beyond fanatical service, being way out in front in education and training and getting industry certifications that are recognized in the IT field has helped us. When the IT people see that our tech is Cisco certified, a lot of their concerns go away because they know we understand the world they live in.”

Overall, Keeler says, Tech Systems doesn’t feel too challenged by obstacles. “We are a small company with high entrepreneurial spirit. We are very deep technically. All our account managers are CPP certified. We have a high level of training. We don’t feel the impact of the economy like a lot of folks. We concentrate in a negotiated environment. We develop relationships rather than going after bids.”

Tech Systems has also grown through acquisitions – a process they approach like everything else. “We have grown in two ways. One was clients taking us into new geographic areas of opportunity. The other was being approached by companies that are smaller and haven’t been able to grow as they’d like. When we interviewed a guy in Houston, we saw him to be very much like us. We are looking to acquire the proper mindset that we can develop into doing things the way we do them. We have merged around individuals that were like us philosophically,” Keeler says.

“We are very unusual,” he adds. “There is not much standard about us. We have a unique group of people. They are our greatest asset. We have taught them a culture that’s uniquely different. When we started FOCUS we thought we were developing a canned list of benefits.” Keeler says he realized later that FOCUS was much more than just the creation of a set of customer rewards – it became a business philosophy and cultural cornerstone that defined Tech Systems from within and to its marketplace. ■

### Tech Systems: Growth in Action

#### Total revenue per year

1997	.....	\$5,056,018
1998	.....	\$4,472,480
1999	.....	\$4,569,115
2000	.....	\$5,797,326
2001	.....	\$7,145,847
2002	.....	\$7,894,764
2003	.....	\$9,329,830
2004	..	\$14,000,000 (estimated)
2005	..	\$18,000,000 (projected)

Source: Tech Systems

Since founding FOCUS, Tech Systems has blossomed from a \$5 million company to \$18 million (projected) next year.