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Andy Peters '92

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High-tech know-how

Metz's Optimus Solutions becoming information technology leader

Bobbing for pig's feet in a bucket of water in front of your professional colleagues may seem like a cruel practical joke instead of a motivational stunt.

But at Optimus Solutions, it's one of a number of tools borrowed from the "Fear Factor" reality-TV show that founder Mark Metz uses to get his people excited about working at the two Atlanta-area companies where he is chief executive: Optimus Solutions and its recent spin-off, Canvas Systems.

The motivational tools range from the repulsive, such as being made to drink an awful mixture concocted by a fellow employee, to the heavenly, which includes a one-year lease on a Porsche 911 for the top sales person. (Metz counts Porsche Cars North America as a client.)

Since founding Optimus Solutions in 1998 with three colleagues, Metz has built his enterprise into one of the largest IBM partners in the Southeast, with 300 employees. The company sells hardware and software made by IBM, Cisco, Hitachi and other high-tech powerhouses to big companies, while helping companies keep their computer systems running smoothly with maintenance and upgrades.

Optimus also sells the invaluable service known as "consulting," the hands-on assistance on how to install and make all the new technology work properly.

"We're not selling to mom-and-pop businesses. We're not selling PC's," says Metz, a 1985 Furman graduate.

He's also had to stay edgy in the area of employee relations: At 41 years of age, Metz is one of the oldest people on staff. He is even willing to avoid the spotlight and potential riches of Wall Street or a merger to keep his freedom.

"I do not ever want to go public, because I think that would ruin the unique environment that we have created," says Metz, who lives in Norcross with his wife and two children. "I guess I see that environment getting destroyed if we went public or were acquired. We want to stay private so that we continue to make the decisions."

The growth prospects that Metz forecasts, though, would probably catch the eye of Wall Street investment bankers. He believes Optimus will double its 2004 sales from last year, when it had revenue of about \$60 million.

Since his days as a competitive swimmer at Furman in the 1980s, Metz



In 2001 Mark Metz made Georgia Trend magazine's annual "40 Under 40" list, which recognizes the state's rising stars in business, politics, education and the arts.

has been thought of as someone who knew what he wanted to do, says an old college friend.

"Mark was the type of person that was successful at everything he did," says Alan Dumas '87, chief executive of Boston-based Accunet Solutions, an Optimus customer. "He always had a strong drive. There was never too much of a doubt that he'd be successful."

At Furman, Metz set five swimming records and qualified for the Olympic Trials in 1984 (and again in 1988) in breaststroke. He was an Academic All-American and was chosen Furman's Athlete of the Year in 1985.

He cites late swimming coach Howard Wheeler as one of the reasons he decided to attend Furman, rather than a larger school. "Furman's program and Howard's coaching style were a little less intense than at Florida or Auburn, and I thrived under that system," he says.

After graduation, Metz used his computing-business degree to land a job with the information technology department at Milliken & Co. in Spartanburg, S.C. His gig with the textile giant lasted less than a year before he moved to metro Atlanta to work for SunData, a now defunct IBM re-seller.

Disagreements with his boss, plus a desire to strike out on his own, led to Metz's departure from SunData, and he founded Optimus in a Gwinnett County hotel with three of his top managers in 1998.

Optimus Solutions specializes in tricky procedures, like moving all the computers, telephones and technology equipment for AGL Resources when the parent company of Atlanta Gas Light moved up the street to a new building. It was essential that the gas utility be able to move its offices without ever being completely shut off from its computer systems.

"Most companies can't take the risk of just shutting down and hope everything comes back up," says Metz, who counts among his customers a Who's Who of Atlanta's business elite: Coca-Cola Enterprises, Haverty's Furniture, SunTrust Banks.

Last year, Metz spun off a second company — a computer re-seller firm called Canvas Systems. The company, also located in Norcross, maintains \$20 million worth of rebuilt computer hardware on hand at all times, ready to ship at a moment's notice to corporate customers worldwide. Canvas is actually bigger than Optimus, with \$130 million in sales last year.

Oh, and there's one other incentive program for the super-elite among the sales team. Tom Bates, another Furman graduate (Class of '91), works for Canvas Systems. His reward for being the absolute top sales person? A year-long lease on a Ferrari.

— Andy Peters '92

The author is the Atlanta bureau chief for The Macon Telegraph.