

BUSINESS 101

STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND PHOTO PROVIDED

Front row, left to right: Rodney Cowden and Christine Cowden. Back row, left to right: Kevin Manning, Brian Messer and Mike Howe



Rodney Cowden's company, Sound Advice, Inc., has not only turned into a profitable business venture, but has brought families and friends together through movies, music and computer technology.

The Cowdens—Rodney and his wife, Christine (Chris), Cowden—began their business in 1991, operating out of their Lafayette living room with a desk, chair and telephone.

"I have never been one to go into debt, to do that type of thing," says Cowden. "Not until it got to the point where it was just viable to take the business to the next level," he explains. The Cowdens began their business with only Rodney's knowledge about making good sound and

his passion for music, and Chris's eagerness to help her family own the business of their dreams.

Sound Advice, located at 635 S. Earl Ave. in Lafayette, installs home theater systems, music and sound systems, and various computer technology programs for residential customers, businesses and non-profit organizations such as churches and schools. Cowden recalls how in the early '90s, the concept of watching movies at home with movie theater-style accoutrements was a new idea for home builders.

"I remember several times, when I had to introduce the concept to builders and real estate people, I invited them to my home and set up a makeshift, but for the time—an

elaborate—theater, in our living quarters." This would be his demonstration, the way that the builders could experience what a home theater was really like. Today, at his current shop location on Earl Avenue, he has a sleekly designed demonstration room that is based on the design of the historic Devon Theatre in Attica, Ind. Here the Cowdens simulate the home theater experience for potential clients and give them what Cowden often refers to as the "wow factor," which is that rumble of sound effects that surrounds you when you go to the movies.

While many of his customers do want his staff to construct a home theater, others want only a

music system that can be accessed on a key pad, by touching buttons for selections in any room. Others want a system that brings up their music selections and personal documents on a television screen, so that the family can decide what they want to watch or listen to without all crouching around a computer screen. Others want special features built into their computers — perhaps to aid someone with a disability — or for a specific software adaptation. Whatever the sound or computerized request, Sound Advice can usually suggest and build what the customers want.

A newer component to the business is the information technology department, which was fully operational in 2006 when Brian Messer came on board. Messer is a computer geek, having a lot of information technology experience with larger companies, including being part of the Geek Squad in its early years in the Lafayette area. He came to work for Sound Advice because, he says, there are fewer layers in a small organization, and he can work more efficiently and design systems that are precisely what the customer wants every time.

“We have a lot of clients who just want easy access to their materials,” explains Messer. “It’s not necessarily about getting it big or getting it grand, as far as the presentation goes, although sometimes that is what the customer wants, but often the customer will say, ‘I have all of my music, and I would just like an easy way to get it through my stereo system,’ and we can find some easy ways to get things off their computer and to play on their speakers in other rooms.”

Since opening in 1991, the client list for Sound Advice has grown

steadily, which requires a lot of juggling and good planning to fit everyone in with the company’s small staff of four full-time employees: the Cowdens, Messer and project manager Kevin Manning, in addition to a part-time employee, Mike Howe. Cowden credits two other employees, who are no longer with the company, with helping to make Sound Advice the thriving business that it is today: Lynn Snyder, who was there from the beginning, and stayed with the business for 10 years, and Dan Martin.

However, his most eloquent words of praise are about his wife, Chris, who is the company’s business manager, and who writes the proposals for the customers so they can easily understand the work to be done.

“The number one reason why I have been so successful in this business with Sound Advice is my wife,” he says. “I couldn’t have hired anybody else to do what she does the way she does it. I am just lucky. It’s like a marriage, some of it is just luck.”

Chris Cowden says her passion is less for the sound and music, and more for making sure the business side of things goes smoothly.

“I have the same 20 years of experience with each and every one of our clients that Rodney does, so when a client calls in, most of the time, I recognize their voice, even before they tell me who they are because I have been there that long, and that would be hard to find with a different employee,” she acknowledges.

Like anyone who manages traffic—in the air, on the ground or at sea—good scheduling requires quick thinking and a specific knowledge of what is being scheduled. Manning, who does the project scheduling for Sound Advice, has been with the company for more than 12 years.

“Basically, I take all of our new

projects and coordinate with the homeowner and the builder, and any subcontractors or interior decorators, and just get things scheduled so that we can keep on track for the client,” Manning says. “For existing clients, I will handle all of the service issues and follow-up. I have a rotating list of clients, and I’ll call clients about every six months to follow up and make sure things are working okay and ask if they need updates or changes.”

The Cowdens used the idea for their business with their own family when they built a home theater at their house for their teenage boys, now grown.

“If used correctly, it can be a family unifier,” Cowden says. “We would come home on Friday night, and our home theater would be full of basketball players, football players, cheerleaders, theater people, whatever,” Cowden says. “All these years later, we are now being invited to those kids’ weddings. They still consider us friends, even though we are parents. We feel really humbled by that.” ✽



Rodney Cowden’s passion for music goes beyond the business as he plays drums in a local band.

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