

Putting market data on the map

By Natalie Myers, Staff Writer

Devonshire Associates is hardly a household name, but if you've ever used a Rand McNally Road Atlas, you may have used Devonshire data. Materials from the Westerly firm also help guide Nielsen Media Research; major retailers use it to decide where to build new stores.

Owner, founder and president John Rafferty never thought he'd end up running a data and information services firm when he received his bachelor's degree in entrepreneurial studies from Babson College in Massachusetts.

"I've always had an eye for opportunities, and this is just something that sort of developed over time," he said.

Devonshire started in Connecticut as a direct marketing company, mailing out information and coupons to randomly selected residents on behalf of clients such as Barnes & Noble. It moved to Westerly in 1988.

"Around the early to mid-90s, we started doing more analytic type of work," Rafferty said. For example, when Barnes & Noble asked in which areas people were likeliest to use the coupons it mailed out, Devonshire developed a method to find out.

Today, the company analyzes governmental data, mostly from the U.S. Census, looking at age, household income and marital status, among other things, as well as business information and sales data for industries such as retail, food and services.

In addition, he said, "we collect sales tax information from all the taxing institutes in the United States, all the county governments and state governments. We collect wage and tax information from the government to see what different sectors of industry are growing based on whether or not they're hiring or the wages are going up."



PBN photo/Stephanie Ewens

John Rafferty, owner, founder and president of Devonshire Associates Ltd., started out doing direct marketing, but over the last 20 years, the company has shifted into geographically based market data aggregation and analysis.

All the information is geographically based – by state, county or ZIP code. Devonshire feeds it into software from Scan/US to organize the data and place it on a map.

The company's researchers and programmers spend all year updating the information.

Some can be obtained for free, while some of the more specialized information costs thousands of dollars, Rafferty said.

Clients use Devonshire's information to measure markets, Rafferty said. Devonshire provides annual sales planning guides to the home furnishings and food service industries, for example, and they use it to establish sales territories, prepare advertising strategies, select retail outlets and test new product lines. Devonshire also creates more specialized data for clients. An Hispanic restaurant chain, for example, recently asked for help identifying the best possible locations for new restaurants. Rafferty said the company is analyzing five metropolitan areas chosen by the size of each city's Central American population.

Using an extensive library of demographic and economic data, Rafferty can look at a map of major cities, such as Chicago, and pinpoint the areas with the highest household incomes or retail concentrations. With that, he said, he can even recommend a specific street location.

Devonshire supplies information and analytical data to about 100 clients nationally. Rand McNally, a major mapping, routing and geographic reference company based in Illinois, is Devonshire's biggest client. Each year, Devonshire provides the map company with nearly all the information used in its Commercial Atlas & Marketing Guide.

"We have very few local clients," Rafferty said. Profits increase steadily each year, he added, and a base of clients on multi-year contracts provides financial stability.

Rafferty said Devonshire's size – with only 10 employees and a few more on contract – is one of the reasons for its success. Being small enables the company to react quickly to projects assigned by major clients such as Rand McNally, he said.

The company is unique in that it has one of the largest economic data libraries in the industry, Rafferty said. Over the years, "we've created probably the most complete economic data library that any company has in the industry."

Published 03/18/2006

Issue 20-49