

LANCASTER COUNTY

Lancaster's ConnectedSign provides companies greater control of screens

BY JOHN HILTON
johnh@cpbj.com

Outfitting your business with digital signage is no longer the expensive option it once was, said Loren Bucklin, vice president and chief technology officer with ConnectedSign in Lancaster.

For as little as \$2,000, a business can get started with a personalized screen delivering news, weather, company information, advertising and a ticker.

Essentially, it replaces the tradi-

tional waiting-room TV, said Bucklin, who started ConnectedSign in 1993. The big difference is you control all programming and advertising.

"The problem with the waiting-room TV is while you're sitting there waiting for your car to get fixed at the Pontiac dealership, they're playing a Ford ad," Bucklin said.

If cost is one perception to overcome, managing the technology is another. A ConnectedSign contract includes training, and Bucklin said users

can be up and running their new digital sign in about a half-hour.

"We tell them to start out small," he said. "Just set up a screen and you can add players later. The janitor walking by will give you the best feedback."

ConnectedSign started as a small studio creating high-end 3-D content and custom-coded programming for touchscreen kiosks. Those early processes were clunky and time

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President **Brigitte Bucklin** and Vice President and Chief Technology Officer **Loren Bucklin** operate **ConnectedSign**, based at **Urban Place** in Lancaster. PHOTO/ AMY SPANGLER

CHESTER AND LANCASTER COUNTIES

FEELING THE BURN

Waste-oil heater manufacturer sizzles with 150 percent growth

BY JOSEPH DEINLEIN
joed@cpbj.com

For the owners and operators of Clean Energy Heating Systems LLC, there's no place like Central Pennsylvania.

They used to work for Clean Burn, a company that makes commercial heaters that burn waste petroleum products and was started in Leola, Lancaster County, by Ben Smoker in 1979. But the firm was sold in November 2010, and the new owner decided to move operations to Wisconsin, starting in 2011. With the move went about 25 jobs.

"I was doing a lot of flying during that transfer," said Virgil Zook, head of sales and marketing for Clean Energy. "It was a transfer of knowledge, mostly."

He and six others decided they didn't want to leave southcentral Pennsylvania. And at the same time, they saw ways to improve the product.

So they created CleanEnergy, which produces three models of a new heater that takes any petroleum product — waste oil, hydraulic fluid, transmission fluid — and burns it to create heat. That waste oil warms stainless steel vertical tubes through which air is blown to spread heat into the room. This is an improvement over older designs, which didn't use stainless steel and had horizontal tubes.

Only ash that is EPA-rated safe for landfills is left. That's a plus for vehicle garages or large farming operations, which normally would have to contract



Chester County-based **Clean Energy Heating Systems LLC** spent more than \$100,000 on a robotic welder from **Yaskawa Motoman Robotics** about two months ago. Production manager **Doug Stoltzfus** demonstrates the new machine, which the company hopes will double production. PHOTO/ AMY SPANGLER

out to dispose of the oil.

The heaters range in price from \$4,395 to \$7,595. The company also manufactures a boiler, which costs \$11,495.

All of the company's investors still live in Lancaster County, Zook said. When things started, there were only

three full-time employees; four of the owners didn't work for the company full time, Zook said. Today, there are seven employees working at the plant, located in Honey Brook, Chester County, just a stone's throw from the Lancaster County line.

The commitment to the region and


their product improvements are paying off: While declining to give dollar figures, Zook said business is up 150 percent year to date, with 21 distributors from coast to coast and in Canada.

'Steady stream of oil'

Waste-oil heaters are logical for

businesses that generate a lot of waste petroleum. Federal law establishes a "cradle to grave" responsibility for such products. That means that, even if a company hires another firm to haul away and properly dispose of the waste


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BURN

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oil, it is still responsible for that oil.

“If you hire someone and he dumps that oil down in the river, you’re still on the hook for it,” Zook said, “even if he also took oil from six other places.”

So disposing of such products in-house is beneficial. But turning that disposal into heat saves companies money.

For example, Keller Brothers Ford in Lititz uses three waste-oil heaters, one of which is from Clean Energy, said Mike Foose, a certified Ford technician responsible for the business’s waste oil. The plan is to replace the other heaters with two from Clean Energy. The heaters warm the garage bays and showroom.

“We’d go through 8,000 to 10,000 gallons of heating oil” 10 years ago,

“If you hire someone and he dumps that oil down in the river, you’re still on the hook for it, even if he also took oil from six other places.”

Virgil Zook, Clean Energy



PHOTO/AMY SPANGLER

Virgil Zook is head of sales and marketing for Clean Energy Heating Systems LLC. The Chester County company manufactures three different models of heaters that take any petroleum product — waste oil, hydraulic fluid, transmission fluid — and burn it to create heat.

Foos said. “We don’t buy heating oil anymore. The first year of using (Clean Energy’s heater), we estimated we saved \$32,000. With oil at \$3 a gallon, you do the math.”

The furnaces are EPA approved only for commercial or industrial uses. That’s because even the smallest of Clean Energy’s heaters needs 600 gallons a year minimum.

“You need a nice stream of oil,” Zook said.

‘Sky’s the limit’

As the brand has become more popular, production has picked up. Clean

Energy spent more than \$100,000 on a robotic welder from Yaskawa Motoman Robotics about two months ago, said welder/engineer and production manager Doug Stoltzfus. With the new machine, the company hopes to double production.

With about three years under their belt, where do the partners in Clean Energy see the company going?

Upward, while staying grounded in Central Pennsylvania.

“The sky’s the limit,” Zook said. “We expect to sell thousands upon thousands in no time. And we’ll continue to make them better.” ■

TRAIN

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Industry trend

Saunders says the company’s current locations have done well, with the biggest growth “when the economy was supposedly down.” That’s in line with industry trends, both in the growing popularity of health clubs and in a new development in a landscape once dominated by big-box gyms.

Boutiques like Power Train “have been the growing market segment as of late,” says Meredith Poppler, spokeswoman for the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association.

Chad Hurst is one of Power Train’s new franchisees. He’s currently deciding between two West Shore locations, both of which would be repurposed facilities, and is aiming to have it up and running before the end of the year.

“I do a lot of different business ventures,” Hurst says, including some Jimmy John’s Gourmet Sandwiches franchises. He met Saunders a few years ago and was impressed by his business and personal reputation, which played a role in his decision to join the franchise.

“It was an untapped market, to a certain point,” Hurst says when asked why he chose the West Shore. He also

likes the proximity. It’s close enough, he thinks, to benefit from buzz on the success of the current Lancaster County locations.

People power

In addition to being choosy on his franchisees, Saunders is also paying a lot of attention to the human factor on the administrative front. He hired a couple of people from Auntie Anne’s Inc., the Lancaster County-based company that famously rose from farmers market stand to worldwide franchise, and also brought Scott Morris on board fresh from a long run at Town Sports International, the largest health club company in the Northeastern United States. Morris is now Power Train’s vice president of operations.

“I’m really passionate about what I do and fortunate enough to surround myself with a team that has the same vision and goals,” Saunders says. And, he adds, he’s planning to stay put.

“We started here and are going to continue to grow our corporate office here,” he says. Then he mentions the professional hockey team from Russia that came to Power Train in Manheim, a 2013 occurrence that ESPN chronicled. “Just being able to do that stuff in Central PA is fantastic.” ■

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