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Technology consultant comes up with another bright idea

By **TIMOTHY J. GIBBONS**
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The manuals on various technical subjects crowding the bookshelves in Manish Kothari's office make sense: He is, after all, a technology consultant.

But what's that prototype of an inflatable emergency light doing stuck in the corner? How does a guy who built his business as a consultant end up as a lighting salesman?

Manish Kothari with three of his prototype 15-foot-tall emergency inflatable lights in the backyard of his Mandarin home. The fabric tubes are inflated by a fan at the base and contain a single 400 watt metal halide bulb inside the top of the column. BOB SELF/The Times-Union

For Kothari, an Indian immigrant, what his business does is less important than finding things that it can do well, niches that Prism Consulting Services can fill. Over the years, he's focused on keeping his business nimble, allowing him to take advantage of a range of opportunities.

When Kothari moved here in 1995, he couldn't find a job that would utilize his electrical engineering credentials, so he went back to school to learn about computer networking. He then moved from engineering to sales to running his own company, all with an eye on finding the best opportunities.

"When you come from India, when you leave your country for another, you better be prepared for change," he said. "You better not plan on just sticking to one profession."

His newest profession: lighting salesman.

Earlier this year, Prism bought rights to manufacture and distribute an inflatable emergency light in 22 countries across North and South America and Africa. Kothari's father, in India, manufactures the light -- distributing it in seven countries -- and Kothari discovered the product while perusing his father's corporate Web site.

"I am proud of the fact that he boldly ventured for this business," his father, R.L. Kothari, said. "From the very beginning, I found him of enterprising nature and encouraged him to take challenging jobs in life."

Initially, Kothari tried putting the inventor of the product in touch with a lighting company in Nebraska, but when that company decided against the venture, he figured Prism could take it on.

Already, in addition to designing and maintaining computer networks, Prism helps clients comply with the technical side of health insurance regulations, certifies companies that meet standards set by the International Organization for Standardization and works on medical imaging machines.

"No one fixed line of products is good for any business," Kothari, 33, said.

Manish Kothari sells these emergency inflatable lights. When shut down the deflated tubes are easily packed with their base in a small soft case. BOB SELF/The Times-Union

Of course, that introduces a new level of complexity, as Kothari tries to coordinate the different aspects of Prism. "My task list is pretty long," he said. "Sometimes it's difficult to wear one hat for a business meeting and then take it off and put on a different hat for the next meeting."

Prism has hired a marketing manager, Gregg Taylor, to handle that side of the business, has a colleague handling distribution in Africa and is talking to manufacturers reps around the world -- a totally different approach compared to Prism's core businesses, which focused exclusively on North Florida.

"It's been a joy to work with him," said Taylor, who has his own business consulting company. "I'm real excited about the product and what we can do."

Kothari has been successful, Taylor said, because of his work ethic and his willingness to be creative. "He understands that there's more than just one revenue stream out there," the marketing manager said. "He got the IT consulting business off the ground, and it's doing very well, but he's looking at how he can increase his return on investment for the company."

Moving in a new direction requires the 33-year-old Kothari to adopt new practices. For example, he has started going to trade shows, a marketing move unnecessary in the other products. The inflatable light, though, turns out to be tailor-made for such opportunities: "It's 16 feet tall, towering over the booth," he said. "People could see it from all over. It basically sold itself."

4 tips of Kothari's success

Diversify: Manish Kothari determined to take Prism in different directions in an attempt to deal with the volatility of technology-based businesses. If you think your company is too narrowly focused, try finding niches that might go up when your core business goes down.

Work with your strength: At the same time, you don't want to spread your business too thin. In Prism's case, the company focuses on technology-related fields, drawing upon Kothari's background in computers and electronics.

Always be searching: Recently, while Kothari was at a trade show promoting the new emergency light, he saw a self-heating food product that piqued his interest, leading him to start adding another line to his company. "I am always on the lookout for different options and suggestions," he said.

Hire the right people: Although Kothari oversees everything Prism does, he also hires specialists in various areas to take care of the details. A colleague, for example, is handling sales of the emergency light in Africa, taking advantage of contacts and expertise Kothari doesn't have.

Timothy J. Gibbons/The Times-Union

Adding the emergency light to Prism's product mix should help limit volatility for the business, he said, especially with a worldwide market. "The scope of application is huge. We always thought we'd have to go global," he said. "Depending on the country, we'll go to different types of dealers and sell it for different types of applications."

At its most basic, the light is designed for emergency situations. It runs off a generator and can be set up by one person in about three minutes in total darkness, the inventor, Guido Medici, said. Kothari has talked to a variety of emergency management agencies, as well as other end users like construction companies in Mexico.

Jacksonville's Emergency Preparedness Division is looking at getting half a dozen of the lights, said division chief Chip Patterson. The softer quality of the light, plus the 360-degree illumination, would make the product work well in a variety of emergencies, Patterson said, and the portability of the product is unusual as well.

Prism will distribute the lights through dealers, Kothari said, at least partially because of lessons he's learned in the other parts of the business. In the core networking business, he said, it's vital to keep in touch with customers, even if

months or years pass between sales. "That's the best way of getting referrals," he said. "Once we have them, we never want to lose them."

When it comes to the lights, he wants customers to know that they have a local dealer they can talk to. "If I sell to an end user in California, he's not going to feel taken care of with me here," he said.

So maybe there is a connection between the prototype light and the networking books: Not the technology, but the people behind it.

"They're all different lines," Kothari said, "but customer service is important in all of them."

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