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## Maxtena: Something little, but very big

By Kevin Litten

Blacksburg-based Maxtena is making some of the smallest, most efficient GPS antennas on the market—they just can't say where many of their antennas are ending up.

Incorporated only last year after spending its early days operating out of a basement, Maxtena is innovating its way into military contracts and commercial applications with two antennas Maxtena CEO Stanislav Licul says could end up in some "very exciting" applications.

But in an interview, Licul and Maxtena Chief Scientist Warren Stutzman were guarded about saying exactly what those applications will be. They're not trying to break into the cellphone business, which has become too much of a commodities market, they say. But confidentiality agreements and proprietary concerns keep them from disclosing exactly how the antennas are being used.

What they will say is that most of their work involves helping clients solve unique problems with devices that require high-quality antennas, and especially equipment that can be enhanced with GPS tracking. Because the tiny antennas have such superior efficiency to similar-sized components, Maxtena's technology has been in demand.

"We don't even advertise and we have people beating the doors down," Stutzman said.

But the company is careful

about the projects it chooses, Stutzman said, and is "top-heavy" on the innovation side. Of eight employees, three hold Ph.D.s.

Maxtena would like to grow, Stutzman said, and would focus on attracting projects that would fuel the company's penchant for challenging work.

"We'd like to find the 'sweet spot' in company size where we can be staffed up to the point that we can have a manufacturing team, and we, the principals of the company, can have more time to innovate," Stutzman said.

In a company as small as Maxtena, which is focusing so much of its energy around two products the size of a fingertip, the strategy seems to be working. Licul and Stutzman declined to provide figures tracking the company's growth, but described the company as being "pulled" by the market rather than trying to insert itself as a new player.

Best of all, Licul said, there has been no shortage of opportu-

nities in the market for the company's principals to get engaged.

"We are extremely excited about what we do," Licul said. "That's part of the equation. You really have to be excited about what you do."

That excitement began early on for Licul and Stutzman, who found a kinship in their passion for antenna design while Licul took Stutzman's graduate-level advanced antenna class at Virginia Tech. The two kept in touch after Licul earned his Ph.D. and went to work for large corporations such as Motorola.

Stutzman, a former Tech professor who is retired but still teaches part-time, helped lead the Virginia Tech Antennas Group and called on Licul after two related clients

expressed interest in having a better GPS antenna developed. So began Maxtena's basement years. The fledgling company had soon developed an antenna that "pushed the limit on the performance" of similar antennas, Licul said.

It was then, Licul said, that they realized that they hadn't just come up with a way to reinvent antennas.

"This is not only a single product but is a technology platform that is scalable," Licul said. "Understanding how the antenna works was a big undertaking. We knew at the beginning that this was a platform."

That initial customer — and the hard technical work done in the basement — provided a base for the company to launch without having to seek out venture capital, Stutzman said.

"We got lucky because we got a customer right off," Stutzman said. "That customer allowed us to pay as you go."

Using revenue from the initial project and personal capital from Stutzman, Licul and Chief Technology Officer Jeremy Marks, the company incorporated. Stutzman and Licul said they think they've struck a good balance among the principals, saying that Marks, who has an MBA, makes sure that new projects fit into the company's long-term business plan.

"Introducing a new technology platform is a big balancing act," Licul said. "We don't want to be in the commodity market. We want to get in on challenging products."

(Kevin Litten is a freelance writer based in Blacksburg.)



Founding Member Dr. Stanislav Licul with the Compact Quadrifilar Antenna, one of Maxtena's small GPS Antennas

Cricket Powell



Maxtena's founders: (from l to r) CEO Dr. Stanislav Licul, CTO Jeremy Marks and Chief Scientist, Dr. Warren Stutzman

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