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Century-old Worthington firm was transformed to address technological needs

By RICK ADAMCZAK
Daily Reporter Staff Writer

In a day and age when more people than ever want access to public records, privacy has become a growing concern, due in part to increased instances of identity theft. To address the issue, a century-old Worthington company has developed cutting-edge technology to ensure that information that should be private remains so.

Cott Systems Inc., which was formed in 1888 to index and manufacture binders that hold paper versions of public records, is now riding a wave of growth due to the burgeoning industry of public records security, namely making sure that people's Social Security numbers cannot be stolen from public documents.

The crown jewel for identity thieves is a Social Security number, which can allow them to access, or create, bank and credit card accounts.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, an estimated 8.3 million Americans were victims of identity theft in 2005, the most recent period for which data is available.

Federal courts in 2001 banned inclusion of Social Security numbers on public documents, but millions of paper records were filed before the ban went into effect.

With governments at many levels wanting to redact their records — in other words, edit them so Social Security numbers or other personal information is not visible — Cott Systems is gaining more and more customers.

"Our new products, ones we didn't have four years ago, are now one-third of our business," said Gary Ross, the company's president. "The demand from customers is increasing ... and we're getting busier."

The transition from being a paper-based company to becoming a computerized one in the 1980s has been a profitable move for Cott.

The 90-employee company has in recent years added numerous employees and "revenues were up significantly last year," said Ross.

Cott's biggest customer base is county governments. The firm has customers in 22 states and counting, having added Texas and Vermont in the past year.

Ross said business is only expected to continue to grow.

For instance, starting just last year, Florida counties are required to have all online public records redacted for sensitive personal information. In Ohio, where the privately-owned company has several counties as clients, state leaders are considering making redacting mandatory.

"There's still not a law yet. We think it's coming, it's just a matter of time," said Ross.

While the business is valued, being far-flung across 22 states can be a challenge, he noted.

"Staying on top of legislation in 22 state isn't easy," Ross said. He also explained that one of the issues to be resolved is which party, the court clerk or the software manufacturer, for example, will be responsible for errors that occur.

Using optical character recognition technology, Cott's software programs essentially scan the documents looking for such sensitive items as Social Security or driver's license numbers. Once detected, the numbers are blacked out so they can't be read.

"Our biggest challenge is that forms are not standard. With our documents, the information can be scattered throughout 10 pages," said Ross.

The documents are reviewed manually, but the process is still much faster than redacting entirely manually, Ross said.

Cott processes about 2.5 million images per month.

The firm added the optical character recognition technology in September 2006, and the move has paid off greatly for the firm, said Jodie Bare, director of professional services.

"Business is booming since then," Bare said.

Ross said there are three trends in the business right now. One is the "transport mix," which is the way documents get to government. In the past it was strictly paper, but is now moving to computerization.

The second is e-commerce via the Internet.

"You can buy copies of deeds, mortgages, no matter where you are," Ross said.

The third is disaster back-up, ready if documents are lost or destroyed.

The company's expansion plans are not limited to county records, however. Cott is also looking into court case management, documents used to set up jury pools, hunting and fishing licenses and birth and death certificates.

"Eventually, we're looking to approach private companies," Ross said.

Meanwhile, the company's software is all designed at its Worthington offices.

"We supply the hardware, install it and tie it back to hosting," he said.

The company also prides itself in having a good work environment, indicative by an average tenure of 11 years for its workers.

"It's family-owned and we have a great culture here," said Bare.

The company was founded by Edison Cott, who sold the company to Nelson Ball in 1962. After Ball's death, the company has been owned by his daughters Deborah Ball and Karen Bailey.