

STRATEGIC PLANNING INTEGRATOR OF THE YEAR

Professional Products Inc.'s rebranding of itself as Human Circuit reflects a philosophical shift in how the integrator plans to sustain success.

By Tom LeBlanc

IT'S ACCURATE TO SAY that 15 years of strategic planning culminated in 2011 when 46-year-old Professional Products Inc. rebranded itself as Human Circuit. The act of changing its name is only the tip of the iceberg, however, and not why we chose president and CEO Bruce Kaufmann's company as the "Strategic Planning Integrator of the Year."

On the surface, the name-change is very simple: a nearly five-decades-old company realized its name no longer reflected its solutions.

Big deal. It happens.

What impressed *CI* editors was the company's process of soul-searching. The name-change was just one result, a symptomatic effect of Kaufmann's team taking a blunt look at where it's heading and not liking the looks of the road ahead.

"Part of the strategy behind this name change is to specifically use the new name as the turbo for our business engine," Kaufmann said. With that new engine, he's



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looking to steer in a new direction, colliding with challenges that many integrators face. The biggest obstacle, according to Kaufmann, has been around since 2008: "diminished customer budgets."

In order for a design-heavy integration firm like Human Circuit to be successful in this economy, Kaufmann says you have to be willing to walk away from a potential project. "Our new approach [is] make sure the customer actually has a problem that we can solve, and that they actually need our help. [It] sounds simple, but it isn't typically done in our industry.

"We seriously probe and investigate

infrastructure and networks to determine true customer fit. We ask ourselves if we're really right for the job. We have the courage to say no sometimes, and not try to be all things to all clients. There's a tremendous amount of freedom in this. It allows us to do what we do, only better."

One major reason an integrator such as Human Circuit should consider walking away, Kaufmann said, is the aforementioned issue of diminished customer budgets. Getting better at recognizing when a project isn't a good fit saves an integrator time — system design, job-costing, bid presentation, etc. — and allows them to focus on

OUR "STRATEGIC PLANNING" WAS, IN ESSENCE, an exercise designed to gain the momentum necessary to return to the unique leadership position that we once held — more specifically, a return to the higher profitability that we once enjoyed in what was then a less saturated and less diluted marketplace.

Human Circuit — as Professional Products Inc. — watched the A/V and broadcast reseller and integration community grow exponentially from new companies born from within as well as from companies invading from the outside (IT, telecom and electrical). Finally, as time progressed, this market saturation combined with the economy drove profitability into the ground. It was then that I realized not only was strategic planning necessary to survive but so was strategic action.

During the process of strategic planning — and putting our goals to paper — we realized that reforming the company and adopting a more formalized approach to our market and client needs was critical. We decided to align ourselves more directly with a client base that we believed could more clearly delineate and appreciate the unique value proposition that we have to offer.

The planning included research, analysis and evaluations that led to a new corporate philosophy and mission/vision statement, a value proposition that offers clients an understanding of how technology integration will benefit their business and their competitive advantage, new methodologies on how we approach a client's problems and how technology is applied to those problems, a refresh and retraining of our sales and engineering teams to make sure we have a mutual fit with potential clients, a specific focus on markets and verticals where our core competencies are unmatched by others, and finally an expansion of our dynamic support offering.

The ultimate decision to rebrand and reenter the market place with a whole new approach and message was the result of this "planning" process.

Our rebranding then became the most dominant portion of the planning. In brainstorming for this transition, we realized we already had unique methodologies in our technical approaches, workflow redesigns, problem resolutions, project costing and intellectual property development. We also realized that we were very strong in project management disciplines and development of higher standards applied to best practices theory and had an already very successful support model.

Because support is a huge part of what we do, it maintains and builds our competitive advantage and is fast becoming the clearest differentiator for Human Circuit. The rebranding presented an opportunity to tell a more compelling story to both our existing customer base as well as new ones that we were unable to approach successfully before.

Strategic planning and how you implement it isn't just about survival. It determines if you win, excel and succeed. It improves performance and decision-making, along with creating happy customers and long-term positioning in a highly competitive market.

**Bruce Kaufmann,
President, CEO, Human Circuit (previously Professional Products, Inc.)**

prospective clients that are more promising.

Let's face it: Most integrators aren't great at walking away from a potential project. Sometimes it takes a process of stepping outside of the day to day operations — strategic planning — to recognize wasted efforts.

Looking inward isn't easy, and Kaufmann benefited from some third-party help. The company enlisted Baltimore-based branding consultant Planit to help with the rebranding. Creative director Trevor Villet recalls that, in some ways, it was like watching a company recognize what they are and how to get where they want to go.

"These guys knew that they needed to change and had already begun mentally," he says. "They knew they had to change to continue to be successful. They had this idea of who they were in their heads. They definitely had a mindset of the existing company not being what they really were. They said, 'Help us understand what we can be.'"

If that reads a little touchy-feely, so be it. But understanding where you want your company to go is the first step toward creating a strategic plan for getting there — and sustaining long-term success isn't the least bit touchy-feely. **CI**