

BUSINESS

Taking talk to text



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Shan Chandrasekar, founder of the Asian Television Network, surveys his Newmarket studios.

Centre spreads Asian culture around the world

BY ROY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Television viewers in California will soon be offered a news and entertainment program live daily at 9 p.m. — a program originating in York Region.

It's the latest venture from the Asian Television Network, a specialty television service that has quietly grown into the largest independent Asian television producer outside of India.

ATN, under its founder Shan Chandrasekar, began by airing Indian movies on a community cable channel in Toronto in 1971 and is now a \$30-million company targeting programming to the 18 million people of Indian origin living outside India.

The company, only a year after being granted a licence from the CRTC, is already well on its way to providing South Asian programming to some 500,000 Indian, Sikh, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and East African viewers living in Canada.

"We broadcast in nine Asian languages," said Chandrasekar in his office at ATN's high-tech Newmarket broadcast centre.

"We have one downlink — receiving the signal from India's Doordarshan (the world's largest television network with more than 900 million viewers), and three uplinks sending programs across Canada, the U.S. and the Caribbean.

ATN is available in Canada on the direct-to-home satellite networks ExpressVu and (as of Oct. 30) Star Choice, on Shaw Cable and on Look TV, a new digital service.

"In the Caribbean, we're on basic cable 24 hours a day.

See ATN, page 11.

Markham company becomes world player in digital recording

BY PATRICK CASEY
STAFF WRITER

You speak, it types.

That's where Markham's Better Communication in Business Voice Systems (BCB) is taking digital recording technology.

"Translating speech to text is the holy grail," said Peter Vanderlee, president and chief operating officer of BCB.

"It's what they do in Star Trek, but people tend to forget that Star Trek was 300 years into the future."

Six years ago, BCB started as a niche player in the interactive voice response field, using touch-tone technology to create voice mail prompts.

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Along the way, it developed a series of digital dictation and recording devices that are now used in the House of Commons and the Canadian Senate.

But the past six months have proved to be the most interesting yet for the 40-employee firm, after BCB lined up 16 investors, representing an additional \$5 million in capital.

Powerhouse partners include Flanders Language Valley, a Belgium mutual fund company specializing in voice and sound systems, and Data General, a \$1.5-billion U.S. data storage conglomerate.

BCB has now teamed with Belgium's Lernout & Hauspie Speech Products, one of four players in the highly competitive continuous speech recognition technology field.

Battling against the likes of IBM, Phillips and Dragon Systems, Lernout & Hauspie's Voice Xpress software enables users to talk into a headset and have their speech automatically translated into a computer text file.

Voice commands will prompt the software to perform additional duties such as font changes, bold text, highlight words and rearrange paragraphs.

To help market the Voice Xpress software, BCB entered a marketing alliance



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Peter Vanderlee, president and chief operating officer of Better Communication in Business Voice Systems, is marketing a product that translates speech into computer text.

with UHER Informatik, a leading German manufacturer of audio recording technology, whose products include digital hand-held recorders and multi-channel sound cards that utilize voice compression.

The deal gives BCB exclusive rights to distribute UHER digital products throughout North America, while cooperating on future product developments such as speech processing and recognition applications.

"There is now a real case to be made for the replacement of analog tapes," said Vanderlee. "A plethora of opportunities will open up for us as more recordings are done on a digital format."

"These were all original visions of the company, we just couldn't do everything we wanted working on only hardware."

"The big benefit with software is its greater margins."

BCB's growing reputation was further enhanced when Microsoft lent a hand with a formal introduction to Lernout & Hauspie, having already invested \$45-million in the Belgian firm.

COMPANY PROFILE

■ Incorporated in 1992, Better Communication in Business (BCB) develops products and systems that capture, digitize and compress voice from a variety of sources before flowing voice files over virtually any computer network.

■ In the past 18 months, revenue for the Markham-based company have grown 60 per cent from a base of \$1 million.

■ Existing products include digital dictation's PC-DART (Digital Audio Record and Transcribe) and a digital recording system called MURF (Multiple Unit Recording Facility), currently installed in Canada's House of Commons and Senate.

■ Installations of Courtroom-DART are under way in 17 courtrooms in the United States and more proposals are in the works, including one in Canada and another in the United Kingdom.

■ BCB is set to introduce a new digital hand-held recorder, BCB/Uher, and a new audio player software called Play-ALL. Retailing for less than \$1,000 (U.S.), the bundle provides an entry-level digital dictation system.

■ A strategic alliance with Lernout & Hauspie Speech Products will have BCB integrate its systems with L&H's continuous speech recognition technology.

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