

PROFILE

Tenacious leader drives growth



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

CEO Leo Linder in 2012 acquired Emerge, which now has 280 employees

By **JULIE KIRKWOOD**

Leo Linder is all in. He does not just ski. He takes a steamer to the fjords of Norway and

climbs a snow-covered mountain with felt “skins” on his skis. He does not just exercise. He competes in the Ironman long-distance triathlon. He climbs the Himalayas. He goes adventure racing.

And when he opens a new headquarters for his staffing and recruiting company Emerging 1 Inc., which does business as Emerge, renovations start in October and by February he holds his first meeting in his new, unfinished corner office—with

saws still buzzing in the background.

“This is Inspiration,” he says of the main building on the 6.5-acre wooded campus in Brighton near Corbett’s Glen Nature Park. Then gesturing out his windows to two low, adjacent buildings, “That is Execution, and that’s Creativity.”

Since Linder bought the Emerge portfolio of businesses in July 2012, it has grown from eight to 280 employees, with plans to add 100 more employees worldwide this

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fiscal year. The company has an office in New York City and has expanded internationally, opening offices in India and Japan, and it has seen double-digit revenue growth annually. It is a trend Linder projects will continue in 2016. Emerge ranked No. 6 on the 2015 Rochester Top 100 list of fastest-growing private businesses.

“We have all the competencies that we used to have, but we have an entirely different business model and vision,” Linder says. “And that vision is to be able to help the companies of the world change the ways that they get work done.”

When Linder began working with the Emerge companies roughly a decade ago, their specialty was relationship marketing using classic techniques such as direct mail campaigns, he says.

IT background

Linder, with his information technology background, helped create new relationship marketing campaigns using the latest digital technologies, such as text messaging and online social platforms.

“This is going to sound silly,” says Jim Gabalski, Linder’s former co-worker who is now vice president of marketing for North America for Getinge USA Inc. “Leo helped us build Facebook before Facebook was Facebook.”

For one client, a liquor company, they created a Web experience in which customers could set up a personalized virtual bar. In this bar they could create an online profile, add games for friends to play, share photos, post updates and get messages.

“We started creating these Web platforms for, essentially, online social networks around the brand,” Gabalski says.

They set up a system for people to text

Leo Linder

Position: CEO, Emerge

Age: 44

Education: B.S. in computer information systems from DeVry University, Chicago

Family: Wife Barb Egenhofer; son Everest, 14; daughter McKinley, 12

Residence: Pittsford

Hobbies: Competing in triathlons, ski mountaineering, climbing

Quote: “My wife being a vegetarian, and myself being a former vegetarian, we found it hard to make it through Adirondack winters without Wegmans.”

an ingredient name, such as “lemon,” to a vodka company and receive a recipe for a mixed drink, allowing the customer to order cocktails with more confidence.

At the time, this was uncharted territory.

“We met a lot of really great, smart clients that wanted to not only push the envelope, they wanted to completely reshape it into a paper airplane and throw it off the mountaintop,” Linder says. “So every day we were forced to live innovation.”

That was before Linder bought Emerge in 2012 and transformed it into a managed services company.

“We have all the competencies that we used to have, but we have an entirely different business model and vision.”

Rather than focus on building technology for its clients, Emerge now specializes in recruiting and providing staff for its clients’ day-to-day management responsibilities in sales, marketing and operations.

Gabalski, who has hired Emerge for a few successful projects in his role at Getinge, says he was impressed that Linder suggested making part of Emerge’s fee contingent on the success of its efforts.

“It’s a very attractive model,” Gabalski says. “Leo’s out in front of the curve ... I can tell you, as the vice president of marketing for a global firm, I don’t get offers from agencies like that very often.”

Early start

Linder’s entrepreneurial instincts have been with him since childhood.

Growing up near Wrigley Field in Chicago in the 1980s, Linder learned to program computers in fifth or sixth grade. He loved it so much, he traded in his Atari 2600 game system for a Commodore 64.

“Being able to actually write the code, the instructions, that this machine would follow was fascinating to me,” Linder says.

By high school, Linder was running a small computer servicing business, building computers for local accountants, lawyers and other professionals. That experience launched him in the early 1990s into computer networking.

From there it was a short step to the beginnings of the Internet, building Web pages for companies—before they were called Web pages.

“He has an uncanny knack of being able to see something ahead of its time,” Gabalski says.

Linder’s first truly successful business was Circle Intelligence, which he co-

founded in 1997. Its major clients were the Department of Defense and Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide Inc.

It was the height of the dot-com bubble. When executives started wandering into the server rooms asking for Internet advice, Linder saw an opportunity.

“The lightbulb went off,” Linder says, “and we said, ‘We shouldn’t be selling technology services. We should be catering further to what their business needs are.’ ... In today’s market, the IT industry calls it a managed service.”

It was during this time Linder met his wife, Barb Egenhofer, who is now vice president of human resources in the wine and spirits division of Constellation Brands Inc.

They met through adventure racing, a sport that involves orienteering, running, cycling, light rappelling and whatever the race coordinator chooses.

In 2002, shortly after their son Everest was born, they loaded up the car for a trip around the Northeast to decide where to relocate. They settled in the Adirondacks, partly because of Linder’s love for the outdoors and mountaineering and partly because Egenhofer grew up there and, with a colicky baby in the car, it seemed like a good idea to live near her parents.

Linder worked remotely writing code in those years, and opened an Internet cafe in Old Forge. They had a daughter, McKinley.

“I drank a lot of coffee,” he says. “I made really good sandwiches. Fashioned them after Potbellies, before Potbellies got really expansive and became a franchise.”

Ultimately, it was the lack of fresh vegetables in winter that lured him to accept a job offer in Rochester a few years later, he says.

“My wife being a vegetarian, and myself being a former vegetarian, we found it hard to make it through Adirondack winters without Wegmans,” Linder says. “Literally, we’d freeze bags of fresh spinach. There just wasn’t anything around.”

Rochester is where he plans to stay.

One of the reasons he chose to be interviewed in his unfinished headquarters, he says, after stepping over electrical cords and dodging construction crews on the way in, was to show his commitment to developing local talent and supporting Rochester businesses.

“This is a utopian market that the rest of the country just doesn’t know enough about,” Linder says. “Fantastic people. Schools. The infrastructure that was built here allows us to live a high quality of life.”

He has become deeply involved in Bivona Child Advocacy Center in Rochester as co-chairman of the marketing committee.

“He’s just always extending himself,”

says Mary Whittier, executive director of Bivona.

He got involved after attending an event with his wife, who is on the board of directors, she says. He was moved by the stories of child abuse and how the center helps, she says, and before the night was through he wanted to know where to sign up.

"He is very emotive and he's not afraid to show it, and I love that," Whittier says. "The issue that we deal with, it just hits him. It hits his heart. ... He's just very comfortable with himself and it's OK to express

emotion, whether that's joy or sadness or sympathy."

He is also tenacious, Gabalski says.

"I think we're just both wired that same way, we just want to live that day to the fullest," Gabalski says. "He's the same way outside of work as he is at work. He will challenge himself. He will go climb mountains in Brazil. He will go to Nepal."

If they are riding bicycles together, Gabalski says, Linder is the one up ahead saying, "We can go faster."

"Once he makes his mind up, he just te-

naciously goes after his direction," Gabalski says. "And even if other people have done it or are doing it, he will think he can do it better and faster."

It is that tenacity that helps him both climb mountains and constantly reach for new business opportunities.

"When Leo smells an opportunity, he'll grab ahold of it and not let it go," Gabalski says. "He's got a real good sense for getting out ahead of the curve."

Julie Kirkwood is a Rochester-area freelance writer.