

# ARIZONA BUSINESS GAZETTE

THE BUSINESS RESOURCE



## Fountain Hills eyes day laborers

Dozens gather daily to seek work in suburb. **Page 6**

THURSDAY, MAY 17, 2007

WWW.ABGNEWS.COM

\$1.00

## BUSINESS PROFILE: MERCHANTS INFORMATION SOLUTIONS

**This week:** Merchants Information Solutions.

**Who:** Russ Johnson, president and CEO.

**When established:** The day after Arizona became a state, February 15, 1912.

**What:** Originally Merchants' and Manufacturers' Exchange, a kind of "better business" exchange, functioning primarily as a board of trade. By the early 1920s, the company was doing consumer credit reporting, a role it kept as the Credit Bureau of Phoenix, the Credit Bureau of Arizona, then Credit Data of Arizona and finally Credit Data Southwest. The last transformations established the company's focus in identity-theft solutions for businesses and consumers, and in background checks for tenant management companies, landlords and employers.

**Where:** Based in Phoenix, the company has clients across the country.

**How much:** Originally? Back in 1912, it didn't take much to open a business in downtown Phoenix. In 1881, the entire city of Phoenix was reported to be worth around \$550.

**How many:** 90. It's a small company with a large presence.

**Why it's called that:** The current name, Johnson explained, harks back to the original company name while incorporating a sense of the current business.

**Bright idea:** Johnson, who has been CEO for a little more than three years, has actively worked with the company's directors to develop a more competitive stance through a tighter focus on specific products and services. They've done this both by purchasing



TOM TINGLE/ARIZONA BUSINESS GAZETTE

"I want to keep giving our customers the 'wow!' factor," CEO Russ Johnson says.

and partnering with other companies. Last year, for instance, they purchased Oregon-based American Tesco, adding psychological and integrity testing to their existing pre-employment screening services.

**Not such a good idea:** "Not moving quickly enough to adapt and focus our businesses. There's a balance that's needed in assessing how to grow — and still maintaining the day-to-day needs of current operations." Establishing the company's current focus took time.

**Biggest challenge:** "I think the ongoing challenge has to be the people. We have a great team in place today. We need to continue to attract and retain the best people possible. We are a very high intensity, fast-paced company, and we need employees who work well in this kind of environment," Johnson says.

**Why I do this:** Johnson, who started his career in banking, early established a reputation as a problem-solver. And that's exactly what he loves to do.

**What he wishes he'd known before he started:** "The irony is not lost on me that we do background screening for employers, and we have a high focus on finding exactly the right people for our own company."

**The next big thing:** Just this past month, the company rolled out a new product aimed at individual landlords and smaller management companies. Called Resident Insight, it's a software tool that will give landlords and small companies the ability to customize an online screening process for prospective tenants. Beyond that, the company is looking to build a nationally recognized force in identity-theft management and background screening — "To be a relevant player in the market," the CEO says.

**Long-term:** To be a dominant player in their target markets and to be the best in providing solutions for their customers. "I want to keep giving our customers the 'wow!' factor," Johnson says.

**Exit strategy:** He's barely started at this round.

**Bottom line:** "We still need to pay attention to the marketplace and continue to look at the places the market is going. We've got a lot of good things going on here." Ninety-five years and counting. This company's not simply surviving — it's increasingly flexible and looking at not just the next five years, but the next ninety and five.

*Do you own or know of a small business that should be profiled? Let us know! Reach the writer at [pabathurst@hotmail.com](mailto:pabathurst@hotmail.com).*