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Fun-loving CEO demands precision

Richard Plympton, leader of fast-growing Optimax Systems, typically wears jeans and tie-dye shirts

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Over the years the phrase “Precision optics in one week!” and Optimax Systems Inc. have gone hand-in-hand.

The slogan was created by CEO Richard Plympton, and it has drawn praise in the local optics community.

“I can associate a lot of things with Rick, but the ‘optics in one week’ initiative was his most brilliant move,” said Michael Mandina, Optimax’s founder and president. “It’s one thing to come up with the tag line, but it is quite another to build a compelling financial model around it and then couple that with a campaign to educate the market about a way of doing business that does not meet the industry norms.

“Rick’s drive, determination and promotional prowess really changed the expectations of an industry.”

It also has paid off for Optimax. The Ontario, Wayne County, firm logged record sales of \$13 million in 2006 and expects to hit upwards of \$15 million this year. Employment is growing as well with 135 workers, up 25 percent from last year. Plympton expects to add 25 to 30 people annually over the next several years and expects sales to grow some 30 percent annually.

Last year, Optimax had to turn work away because it could not meet the demand, even running three shifts, five days a week at its 40,000-square-foot facility. That move reflects the need for more workers.

Optimax supplies precision optical components, focused on small volume, high quality and quick delivery. The bulk of

work is for the military and the semiconductor industry, while the rest is divided among industries such as aerospace and medical instruments. Most of Optimax’s

business is outside of Rochester, with half coming from the West Coast.

Plympton’s philosophy can be summed up with his career objective: to innovate and



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

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promote optics manufacturing technologies to benefit society—and have fun doing it.

More comfortable in a tie-dye T-shirt and jeans than a three-piece suit, Plympton, 44, still eats Captain Crunch, loves video games and most enjoys playing with his daughters. He has a “stand-up desk” in his office—no chair—because he does not like to sit.

“I really consider myself a big kid,” Plympton says.

Growing up here

Plympton grew up in Bloomfield, Ontario County, unaware of the existence of an optics program at the University of Rochester.

He attended Finger Lakes Community College after high school. He admits he did not know what he wanted to be when he grew up.

While at FLCC, however, a physics professor at the two-year college who also worked at Eastman Kodak Co. told Plympton he should consider a career in optics. Plympton originally was going to study microelectronics at Rochester Institute of Technology, but after the professor said he could play with lasers at UR, he was sold.

Plympton earned three degrees at FLCC—in engineering science, business administration and computer science—in 1984 and 1985. He then went to UR, where he received his bachelor of science degree in optics in 1987. Several years later, he earned his MBA from the Simon Graduate School of Business in 1999.

All through school, Plympton worked

to finance his own education. His jobs ranged from being a dishwasher to assisting FLCC faculty on computer matters.

While at UR, he took a job at Melles Griot Inc. He worked there from 1984 to 1995 at locations around the world, including Germany, Cocoa Beach, Fla., and Irvine, Calif. He took a one-year break in the late 1980s to travel, spending three months backpacking around Alaska and several months traveling through Europe.

Plympton knew he wanted a change professionally while working in Irvine from 1989 to 1991. He had grown tired of the business travel, which normally hit more than 20 days a month.

“I was used to traveling alone, but after six months doing it on the job I couldn’t develop any intimate relationships,” he says. “I have traveled all over, and there is lots of cool stuff to see, but the people and relationships in your life are what matters.”

His last job for Melles was European technical marketing manager in England.

Plympton returned to the area in 1995 and helped Mandina, who had hired him at Melles, create a customer base for Optimax. Before coming on board at the precision optics supplier, however, Plympton took a three-month trip to the Caribbean for scuba diving.

When he came on board at Optimax in 1996, Plympton was mainly responsible for sales. Today, he wears many hats—meeting with customers and the management

and discussing everything from recruiting workers to bank financing.

He also is working with a consultant on grant proposals, something Plympton believes will come through.

“When you are growing like we are people want to talk to you,” he says.

Off the clock

Despite the workload, Plympton’s daily schedule is flexible. Since he does not use an alarm clock, he may get into the office one day at 8 a.m. and at 9 another day. He rarely oversleeps, joking that his daughters could be considered an alarm clock or wake-up call.

Pictures of his family are displayed throughout his office. A dolphin statue serves as a door holder to remind Plympton of the beach. There is no desk chair, but a futon provides ample seating. Above that hangs a framed picture of the Island of Knossos, which was home to an ancient, educated society with no militia.

At Optimax, Plympton says one of the things he likes best is the work the company does for NASA, a place he envisioned working as a boy.

Optimax created the lens assemblies required for the Mars Exploration Rover

Mission. The Mars rovers are part of the nation’s mission to study the planet Mars. The company’s lenses are used in the Rover’s cameras and for testing.

Leading Optimax

The most challenging part of the job is growing its work force.

The firm has been a driving force in the local optics industry, helping to get the word out about the growing industry and training technicians with expertise in precision optics manufacturing.

Optimax technicians grind and polish optical materials such as glass, crystal, ceramic and stainless steel. Optimax has machining abilities to make optical components from 3 millimeters to 300 millimeters in diameter. Some 50 percent of the company’s business comes from materials that measure 20 millimeters to 50 millimeters in diameter.

Plympton says it has been an ongoing challenge finding workers who know how to grind glass and other optical surfaces.

To meet that demand, Plympton says he needs a 21st-century technician, which he described as someone who can program computer numerically controlled machines and who has strong math, science and communication skills.

Optimax spends upwards of \$150,000 a year to train workers, which includes in-house training and tuition reimbursement.

The company also is working with Monroe Community College on a developing program that trains metal machinists for the field of optics technology. The basic education for tooling and optics is similar and includes a familiarity with computer-aided design, computer-aided manufacturing and CNC machining, says Plympton, who works with several local high school promoting the industry.

He continues to be amazed that the optics industry remains a secret in the area.

“You don’t learn about our industry watching a sitcom on TV,” Plympton says. “Even in Europe people know about optics in Rochester, but in, say, Canandaigua, they don’t.”

The main focus at Optimax is on continuous improvement, Plympton says.

“We can’t afford to be complacent,” he says. “We need to keep pushing and get better and better every day.”

To help get the best out of each employee, Optimax tries to match each with a job that fits his or her personality.

The firm has potential employees complete a personality test that will help the company match the person up with a job that complements his or her skills. Plympton is a high D—which he describes as someone who is driven or “A.D.D.-ish.”

There is also an emphasis on fun at the

CLOSE-UP

Richard Plympton

Position: CEO, Optimax Systems Inc.

Education: A.S. degrees in engineering science, business administration and computer science, Finger Lakes Community College, 1984 and 1985; B.S., optics, University of Rochester, 1987; MBA from the Simon Graduate School of Business, 1999

Age: 44

Family: Wife, Lisa; daughters, Cecelia, 4, and Lillian, 2

Residence: Penfield

Outside activities: Family, travel, running, tennis, rock climbing and foosball.

Quote: On the optics industry and the local lack of knowledge about Rochester’s contribution: “You don’t learn about our industry watching a sitcom on TV. Even in Europe people know about optics in Rochester, but in, say, Canandaigua, they don’t.”

firm. Plympton offers employees his Cocoa Beach condo at a reduced rate as part of Optimax's Beach Club.

"Life has to be fun," he says.

While fun is a big part of his life—Plympton talked excitedly about an upcoming Florida vacation with his family—he is just as in-

terested in the optics industry. He is a member of the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster and serves on the local council of the Optics Society of America.

He also is working on his leadership skills, including his involvement with CEO Fellows. The group—comprised of local leaders—compares notes and shares best practices.

Mandina says Plympton is committed to lifelong learning and personal development and constantly brings in new books and engages the management team in discussions around leadership, work force development and strategy. Things such as the Optimax Scholarship Program, its in-house fabrication training program and the majority of company social events were initiated by Plympton, Mandina says.

He adds that Plympton always challenges the status quo, constantly asking "What if?" He also brings energy to Optimax.

"He is a gamer and intensely competitive. This helps keep the senior management here on its toes," Mandina says, recalling that when Plympton was a student at UR, it was not uncommon to see him doing cartwheels down the hallway.

He and Plympton rely on personal accountability at

work.

"We continually remind each other that our livelihood is based on each other's ability to perform at a high level, Mandina says.

James Sydor, president, Sydor Optics Inc., has known Plympton roughly 12 years. Sydor Optics serves as a vendor and customer to Optimax, but Sydor also considers the two colleagues.

"The local optics industry is a very close-knit group," Sydor says. "Many of us share the same challenges such as work force development, common market fluctuations and increased competition from off-shore manufacturers. We frequently share ideas and belong to the same trade organizations to further advance the success of our individual companies as well as the local optics industry."

He believes Plympton has worked hard by getting his start at the ground level,

processing optics and learning the fabrication part of the business. He then enhanced his technical knowledge and built a solid business foundation as an undergraduate and graduate student at UR.

"His ideas are very progressive and sometimes can be seen as radical," Sydor says. It is those ideas, however, that have gotten Optimax to where it is today.

"I think that anyone who knows Rick will find that he's always willing to take a risk and to try something different," Sydor says. "When 'conventional' approaches are not effective, a new and fresh tactic may be the means to your goal. Rick is willing to take that risk."

Thomas Battley, executive director of the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster, describes Plympton as someone who is down-to-earth, loyal and does what he says he will do.

It was Plympton who told Battley about several books, including "Co-Opetition," by Adam Brundenberger and Barry Nalebuff. The name of the book—which refers to cooperative competition—has become a buzzword among the local optics community.

"Rick has the vision to adapt to a changing, and competitive, industry," Battley says.

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