

Big business, local roots

By **John Gessner** on July 12, 2012 at 3:14 pm



Data Sales Co. founder Ron Breckner, left, and his son, Robert, stand in front of an old IBM 3420 tape drive on display in the Burnsville headquarters of the company, which is in its 40th year of business. Photo by John Gessner

Data Sales Co. celebrates 40 years of tech success

A few museum pieces are on display in the sleek, modern lobby of Data Sales Co. in Burnsville.

Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Robert Breckner points out the IBM 3420 magnetic tape drive, a bulky data-storage machine introduced in 1970.

“There are still companies that are running them, believe it or not,” Breckner said. “We’ve had a couple of movie studios call us to use them as props for sci-fis.”

Data Sales, a homegrown company that began its 40th year of business in May, has one foot planted in the technologies of old and the other marching toward the newest hardware solutions.

Still family-owned, Data Sales is now a full-service business technology company that still deals in used and refurbished IBM products.

Family patriarch and Data Sales Chairman Ron Breckner, 75, started out as an IBM salesman in 1961 after graduating from the University of Minnesota.

“There were computers even then, though they were large for what they did,” Ron Breckner said. “That was the era of the 1401 system, followed by the System/360 and System/370, followed by PCs.”

Breckner sold the big mainframes throughout the Midwest, from offices in Omaha, Kansas City and St. Louis, where he was branch manager.

“Honeywell was the main competitor of IBM at that point in time,” said Ron, who works part time these days. “CDC (Control Data Corp.) was emerging, with (William) Norris at the controls. It got to be a

battle. IBM won, in my opinion. ... There's a lot of companies that still use mainframes. They're ones that process tremendous quantities of data."

He left IBM in 1969 and worked for a couple of companies that resold used IBM equipment.

"Then I decided there's more money to be made if you keep it yourself and call your own shots," said Ron, whose May 1973 launch of Data Sales Co. was in the basement of his home on Penn Avenue in Burnsville.

"We were kind of like used-car salesmen in a way," Ron said, explaining that sales were often of products that had become obsolete to the original users.

Ron, who now lives in Prior Lake, and about 10 other dealers were charter members of the Computer Dealers Association, said Robert Breckner, one of four Breckner children, all of whom work in the family business.

"He actually was a front-runner in establishing an IBM used recertified market where there was none," Robert said.

"He knew the product. He knew the customers. He knew the maintenance procedures. He knew the configurations. He knew it all," Robert said.

Beginning with the family basement, Data Sales had four Burnsville locations before constructing a 180,000-square-foot building on the northwest corner of Burnsville Parkway and County Road 42.

"We were one of the first (businesses) in this area," said Robert, a 1982 Burnsville High School graduate who still lives in Burnsville. "We were one of the first ones to develop in the Southcross industrial park area back in 1991. It's a great location — easy access to 35, a beautiful view of Sunset Pond."

The Burnsville headquarters is 70 percent warehouse, technical operations and fleet garage and 30 percent office space. Data Sales also has a 30,000-square-foot location on Scottsdale, Ariz., and sales offices in Houston, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles and Scottsdale.

The company employs nearly 100 people in Burnsville and about a dozen in Scottsdale.

Robert, the youngest Breckner sibling, was an American Airlines pilot before being lured back into the family business in 1992. The oldest, Paul, is president and CEO of Data Sales. The other two, Jane and Bill, work at the company's Scottsdale location. Their mother, Judy, is company secretary, Robert said.

"It's been a wonderful ride," he said. "We've just always been a very close family. Ron has always been kind of the glue for everybody. There was a lot of opportunity, and it was fun."

Data Sales still buys and sells IBM tape drives and disc drives and is one of the top suppliers of used parts back to IBM, Robert said. But the business has eclipsed its IBM-reseller roots.

It began leasing business technology equipment 30 years ago.

"The biggest part of our business going forward is equipment leasing," Robert said. "The real growing area is companies providing services over the Internet. ... We're providing lease financing for all their infrastructure that they use to support service over the Internet."

Other Data Sales specialties include customized IT technical services, equipment refurbishment, IT recovery and nationwide shipping of IT products through its fleet of eight semi trucks.

To celebrate its 40th anniversary in May 2013, the company is planning a year of special events and corporate activities, including a community-service campaign.

The Data Sales Gives Back campaign is providing employees with 400 company-paid hours to volunteer on behalf of local nonprofits.

More information on Data Sales Co. is at www.datasales.com.

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