

MENTOR

Bob Baron says success comes from 'stick-to-it-iveness'

Name: Bob Baron

Title: President, Chief Executive Officer

Company: Baron Services Inc.

Location: 4930 Research Drive, Huntsville

Tell us about your career path.

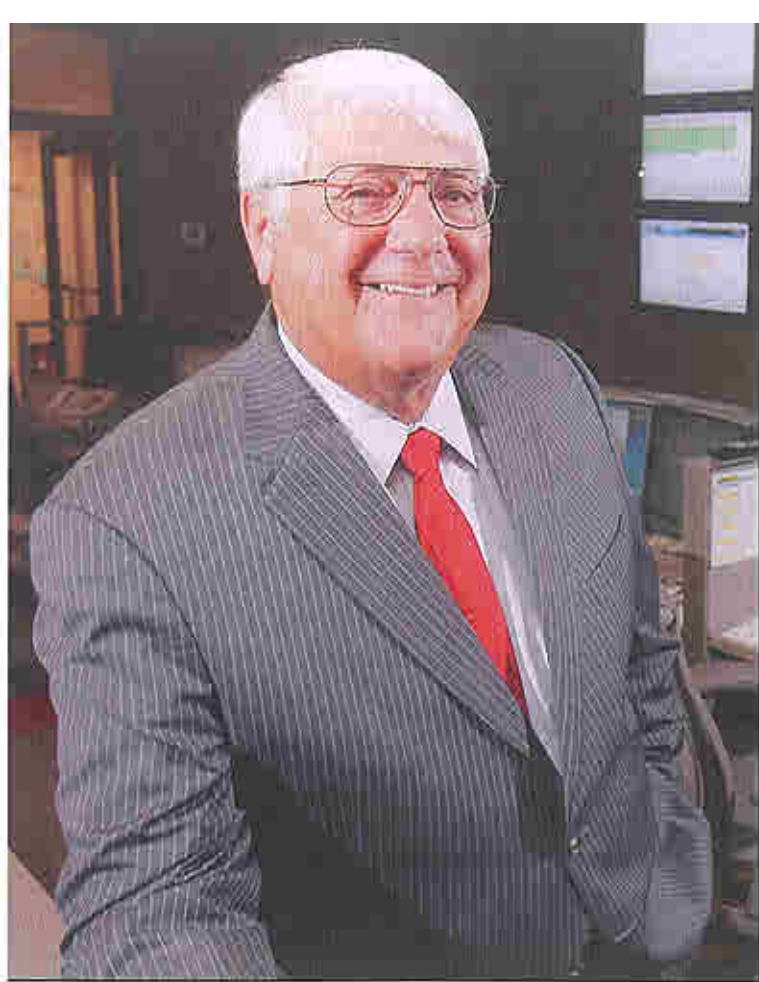
I actually worked my way through college (at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville) as a disc jockey and later program director in radio. I came here in 1975 as the group program director for Channel 31's radio stations. In '76 or '77, the folks up at the television station asked me whether I would add to my responsibilities and do the weekend weather. Back in those days, there was usually just one weathercast a weekend because they didn't do the newscast on Saturdays. By that time I was a pilot and had some FAA advanced weather training. I filled in and did the weekend weather.

In 1978, I (found) out that our chief meteorologist had departed, so I was temporarily responsible for all of the weather programs, as well as programming for the two radio stations. Radio by day, TV by night.

The television station wanted to have a credentialed meteorologist, and I was kind of filling in the gap. I took some courses here at UAH, I took some correspondence courses (and) I finally qualified for professional membership. I was chief meteorologist at the station until 1984.

In 1984, I accepted a similar position at the NBC affiliate in Tampa, Fla. During that three-year period, I actually was watching the competition and I saw this new technology that they had, which was strike-by-strike lightning. They could show you where the lightning was hitting in Tampa Bay. The radar didn't work because there was always just a big glob of blue over the water, but the lightning did.

I came back here in 1987. This time I was working for Channel 48. One of the first things I did was talk to some of my



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buds at NASA, because I found out that they had an R&D lightning network here across North Alabama. A fellow made arrangements, worked all of the necessary things so that I could tap into NASA's lightning network and display, for the first time in the Tennessee Valley, strike-by-strike lightning. Our job was to develop the software to display it, and the networking in order to get it here. I distributed it to some others that NASA knew wanted it, most notably Huntsville Utilities. Actually, to this day they have one of our systems over there. They could see where these lightning storms were, and they would be on the scene as soon as the lightning passed to try to correct anything.

November 15, 1989, we had a major tornado come through Huntsville. It was pretty devastating for a number of reasons. It passed within a couple hundred yards of our home. We didn't know anything about it. We knew we had one on the ground, but we didn't know how big it was, we didn't know which direction it was moving, we didn't know how fast. We certainly didn't get a timely message to those in harm's way, and we lost 23 people that day, some of whom were neighbors of ours. I came to realize that I thought we had weather tools, but what we really had were weather gadgets. They were things that looked good on television, but they couldn't give me precise, live information.

Two months after the tornado was when Baron Services incorporated. It was with the idea that we've got to be able to do better. We recognized that the one thing that did work was the lightning (detection). Everything else was so slow and was so inaccurate that we couldn't tell anything. Huntsville Utilities, which had this lightning detection, didn't know that we had a tornado, but they knew we had lightning. And they were the first on the scene following that tornado. They were already up and operating before any other emergency vehicles got there.

So it pointed us in a direction. Let's start with lightning, because we know it's exact, and we know it's instant, accurate.


We were fortunate because we'd already made mapping for lightning. Over the next year, we were able to integrate live radar, and then we came up with this idea of being able to click on a dangerous storm. You had to be a trained meteorologist because it was all manual. You could click on a dangerous storm, draw out a little ribbon on your computer that would give you a direction and a speed, say northeast at 35 miles an hour. If I had estimated the storm was traveling 35 miles an hour, I'd pull the ribbon out until it said 35, I'd let go, and it would create a box that told me and told our viewers this is where the danger was going to be over the next 15 minutes. It would also go into a database we had, and look in all of those little communities that were in the path of the storm for the next 15 minutes, post them on a map and the estimate time of storm arrival.

That was our first commercial product. We introduced that in the end of

1992, installed six of them in '93. We proved the validity of the technology, and it kind of grew from there.

I never really figured it was going to go further than that, but it did. We actually started out of the house, from 1990 to March of '93. Didn't really have any product until '92. At the end of '92, my office was "sales." My daughter was away from school, so we commandeered her room for "software" and the dining room was "manufacturing" and the living room was "inventory." March of '93, with only two customers and a third that looked like they were going to buy, the wife finally threw (us) out of the house. We set up shop over on Bob Wallace Avenue.

After the first year, we realized that it was a very limited market because I had to tie on to live digital radars, and there were very few out there at the time. So it forced us into developing and manufacturing radars. We became a display and



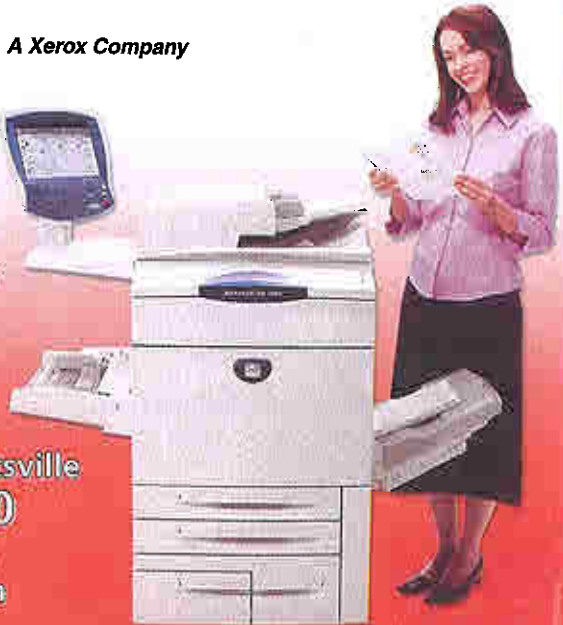
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radar manufacturer. Because we wanted to do a better job of identifying severe weather, it led us into processing of all the weather data that we do. That, in turn, led us to looking for other areas where we could be of service.

In 2000, we started looking for a way to put weather (information) into the cockpit. Lo and behold, there was XM. There had been a lot of people trying to get weather to the cockpit, but the technology just wasn't there. The delivery system wasn't there until XM came along. They've got powerful satellites, two of them, so they're redundant and you can get a reliable signal to a little antenna.

At the time, they could not have cared less about aviation; they wanted to get music to every automobile. It worked out perfectly for us. It's been a good relationship. We were the best at weather. XM was the best at a distribution means. Our business plan was to work with all the people that manufactured avionics for

airplanes so they would be encouraged to put our weather on their equipment. That has had almost 100 percent acceptance in aviation. It has been a major factor in the success that this partnership has enjoyed.

What have been some of the high points of your career?

I think that what we have done in the way of changing broadcast focus from neatsy-swell pictures to real weather tools, particularly severe weather tools, has been a source of major satisfaction on my part. We have been given e-mails that have been sent to our client television stations, thanking them for saving lives. That was exactly what the intent was 20 years ago. It remains, actually, the focus of this company, even though we have gotten into a whole bunch of areas. The idea is that we're developing things that help people understand what's happening with the weather that can be used to protect themselves and their families. That, I

think, has got to be the No. 1 satisfaction.

The past couple of years, (we've received) achievement awards and things like that. I think, secondarily, it's nice to be recognized by your peers after all these years. But the No. 1 thing is that we have performed a good service for community and country.

We're still involved in it. We are six different companies, but the radar division is just at the tip of the iceberg in brand new radar technology. Our newest product is 3D everything, everywhere. You can move anywhere in the world and see the weather in two or three dimensions. It's a neat state-of-the-art capability that we've just introduced. In the area of data, we've been known for a long time as being a company that can analyze storms live. Every time we go into severe weather, everybody's got our stuff and they're using it. We can look at a storm in its entire volume, and analyze it very rapidly, display it, and come up with some conclusions as to how dangerous that storm is.

But it's been difficult to tell which storms will turn into a tornado, and which ones won't. They can be twisting, but nothing happens. So what we've done is kind of married the sure knowledge we have of a storm and the forecast information that we have about the surrounding environment. What's that storm moving into? Is it going to be less or more stable? By looking at both of those factors and giving it a relative value, we have had a significant amount of success this year in being able to tell which storms are most prone to becoming tornadoes. That's whole new technology and data. I'm very pleased with the innovative thought processes that our folks have gone through to develop some whole new concepts.

Have you ever had a mentor?

Certainly my dad. He was a career Air Force pilot, and we were very close. He was able to see some of the early successes of the company. I regret that he never got to see us move into (the new) building because I think he really would have

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appreciated the big "Baron" that's sitting out front. I can remember as a kid, him telling me to select what I wanted to do, something that interested me, but then to give it 100 percent. There would always be others who would want to do what I was doing, and that I needed to go 100 percent into anything that I did.

He said that if you do that – if you're committed to what you do and you work hard – he says, "Don't worry because the money will follow." And he was right.

What are some important lessons you've learned?

I think that stick-to-it-iveness is one of the most important. (When) I was maybe 10, 12 years old, I played Little League baseball. I was a pretty good left-handed first baseman. I made it to the Minor League All-Stars and I was a backup pitcher. Never pitched, I was always over there at first base and felt good about it. All of the sudden, we're in this Minor League All-Star game, and they ran out of pitchers. And they moved me off first base and said come on and do it. I was scared to death. I put two or three batters on base, walked, and I chickened out. I said get somebody else, I'm ruining this game. Despite all of the encouragement, I quit. My dad talked to me after the fact. As it turned out, the next guy in line was even worse than I was, but at least he hung in there and we finished the game. It wouldn't have been any different, wouldn't have been any worse that what we ended up with, and I wouldn't have quit.

In all of my experience, quitting is really not an option. I think that I became pretty adept at getting to where I knew we needed to get, and if not directly, indirectly. That was very helpful when we were very competitive in radio. There were a lot of things that I couldn't afford because I didn't have the budget for it. That didn't mean you couldn't get it done. You did it cheaper, you did it better, more creatively. I think that was particularly helpful for me through my broadcast years.

When I was in television, just before

I went to Florida, a friend of mine who put in fire alarms came to me with this idea. He says, "I've got these fire alarms that I put in, and they've got a little emergency button, a panic button that you put in and it goes all the way to the (emergency) answering service and they bring in the appropriate people. I think we could make one of these things with a button on it that somebody could carry, and then if they had a medical emergency, they could just press it." And I said, "That sounds like a pretty good idea." It almost had gotten turned over to me, but I got this offer to go to Florida and didn't follow through on it.

Well, shortly after I get to Florida, First Alert comes out and of course they've been a major company. If I'd have just focused, if I'd have just followed through, the future could have been a whole lot different. So when I came back from Tampa, I did have this idea of developing some weather tools that could be helpful. I remember coming back from a football

game with my sister and her husband, and I'm talking about this new storm tracking that I got. I said, "I think this idea is too important to let it go."

I had to give up being on television. When my contract came up, they didn't want me doing this other stuff. It was a case of either leaving, walking out on a good, solid broadcast contract and starting this questionable company, or not starting the company and having a contract. I chose the company, and this is the result, 19 years later. Stick-to-it-iveness is probably the most important thing I've learned over time. Secondly, it's important to convey one's thoughts to others.

What advice do you have for young professionals interested in starting their own companies?

I would strongly suggest that it be something that is a passion for them. When I entered into this, I obviously felt like I needed to be able to earn a living, but we did not enter it for the

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money. I felt like I could make a difference in weather, and that was the focus. When I got into it, I never had any conception of how big it would be. I never had the impression, initially, that one could make a long-term success out of it, and certainly never imagined it would get as big as it is.

I think that starting a company is really exciting. You are responsible for everything. But it should be entered with the idea that you can derive a lot of self-satisfaction from it, not necessarily monetary remuneration.

Is there one thing you know now that you wish you had known when first starting out?

Oh yeah. That's also part of the fun, the excitement, of starting a company. I've often said that starting the company was the second thing I got into not knowing anything about it. The first was parenthood. I think the first worked out pretty well, and now so has the second.

There also were a lot of mistakes made. That's the way you learn over time. We could have, but didn't patent our first manual storm tracking (system). You can't patent something after a year. So we missed that. I made some poor choices in some early partners that challenged the company for a while. We've made some good and bad decisions on people. Mostly they've been good decisions. I used to pride myself, still do, on being able to pick out those that have the capability and the desire to be a part of the team. We have developed a company culture over time that kind of dictates the people that are success-oriented.

There are some things that weren't mistakes, some very good decisions that we made over time. One of which was that we would always be over and above-board. We don't do anything that's questionable ethically. That's served us well in some international situations, where we just walked away from million-dollar deals because it

didn't smell right. We probably could be a bigger company than we are, but I sleep well at night.

What excites you about your work today?

In an umbrella sense, being able to develop new technologies. From the beginning, I think I was the "thought guy" – you know, "Can we do this?" I've been very blessed that we've had people that have been a part of the team that have said, "Yeah, we can do that." That's the exciting part. In each of our areas we are heavily involved in the newest concepts in radar. The U.S. government agrees with us, because we're the ones who got the contract, we're working with them on implementing the data, the combination of looking at actual conditions and forecast conditions, and marrying them into what we call the Baron Tornado Index. This is brand-new technology and it's very, very exciting to me.

Anything else you'd like to say to the next generation of business professionals and entrepreneurs?

Looks to me like the future is so bright you've got to wear shades. (Huntsville) is a great place to be. I don't think we could have been as successful had we been anywhere else. It is breathtaking to visit some of our neighbor companies and to see some of the things that they're involved in. This is a marvelous area for technology. I'm sure there are other areas too, but the concentration of so many different types of technology is just marvelous. You do see the best of the best here.

That means that for young people, they associate and learn from the experience of some of these companies, and at some point in time there's a real opportunity there to take some of your own ideas and things that you really want to see come to fruition. The first step is a doozy, but in many cases it's very rewarding. ■

By Anna Claire Vollers

VITAL SIGNS

COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION

2007: \$182,834,000
2008 through October:
\$103,215,000

MANUFACTURING CONSTRUCTION

2007: \$20,400,000
2008 through October:
\$13,431,000

ELECTRIC CUSTOMERS

Total large commercial customers
(over 50 kwh)

January 2008: 2,887
October 2008: 2,835

Large commercial kilowatt sales

January 2008: \$187,980,296
October 2008: \$203,828,561

COST OF LIVING

For the fourth quarter of 2008
National average: 100

HUNTSVILLE FIGURES

Composite index: 92.7
Grocery items: 96.9
Housing: 80.6
Utilities: 83.2
Transportation: 97.4
Health care: 94.3
Misc. goods & services: 103.2

AIRPORT TRAFFIC

2007 passengers total: 1,239,527
2008 passengers through
October: 1,062,382
2007 cargo weight total:
394,078,193
2008 cargo weight through
October: 325,403,112

EMPLOYMENT

Unemployment rate
for October 2008
Huntsville Metro: 3.9%
Madison County: 3.8%
Huntsville Region: 4.7%
Alabama: 5.4%
United States: 6.1%

NON-AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT

January 2008: 211,000
September 2008: 215,000