

Getting a charge

ABT grows business by offering clients maintenance services

Nothing gets done in modern industry without power, and that happens to be the specialty of Advanced Battery Technologies in Greensboro. The company sells power systems both for vehicles and for backup generators, with customers all over the country.

ABT, as it's known, is marking its 10th anniversary this year with a move into a new, larger headquarters building and is looking to expand its staff of 30, of which 17 are in the Triad.

Describe the business: ABT engineers, furnishes, installs and maintains battery and charging systems for vehicles, such as forklifts and airline ground support and also for backup power for things like telecommunications systems and data centers.

Biggest obstacle? "Batteries have traditionally been sold mostly by relationships, which makes it hard to break in," Fearn said. "We had to find something unique that would give people a reason to listen to us. Part of that came from using my 23 years in manufacturing to help customers really understand the technology and what it could do." ABT also partnered with a manufacturer, Hawker, that Fearn had consulted with before and that had some unique technologies that weren't widely used in the U.S. at that time.

Biggest competition? Several battery brands — Exide, Douglas, Deka. "Since probably 75 percent of the business is basically a commodity, you have to compete on price. But you can distinguish yourself with innovative products," Fearn said.

Best decision? Taking a risk on Guaranteed-POWER service, a turn-key, all-inclusive battery power contract that allows clients to have stable costs and reduce the size of their fleets because they don't have to worry about poor maintenance or a lack of knowledge sidelining their vehicles. It shifts some risk to ABT because the company then becomes responsible for that maintenance and bears the cost if something goes wrong. But customer reaction has been overwhelmingly favorable.



JULIE KNIGHT/THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Sarah and Ken Fearn are the owners of Advanced Battery Technologies Inc. in Greensboro.

ADVANCED BATTERY TECHNOLOGIES, INC.

Address: 518 Teague St., Greensboro 27406

Phone: (336) 389-1379

Web site: www.advancedbatterytech.com

Who is in charge: Ken Fearn, president and founder

Year founded: 2000

Employees: 30

A hard lesson? How much time and effort can go into studying and recommending solutions that just goes into a black hole if you don't get the job. As many as 1,000 or 1,500 hours could be put into a big contract proposal that might come to nothing. ABT has gotten better at developing models based on prior sales that tell it how to get a proposal on the table without too much time spinning its wheels.

Long-term goal? "We've got five branches in three states so we have room to grow geographically," Fearn said. "We see ourselves becoming more of a power management company, where we serve customers nationwide and remotely monitor their fleets for power consumption and needs. We're already doing some of that."

Advice for other entrepreneurs? It's all about finding good people. Even when you're dealing with something that is a commodity, if you have people you can train to really understand how things work and how they fit together, you'll have a leg up.

Something surprising about the business? "That we remotely monitor more than 3,000 batteries and chargers from here to California," Fearn said. "I can tell you from my desktop in Greensboro if there's a battery in a forklift in California that needs water."

— compiled by Matt Evans