PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

MAX-VIZ INC.

Rebounding company enhances images to aid pilots in challenging conditions

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The past three years have been kind to Portland-based Max-Viz Inc., especially compared to its previous three.

Revenue for the developer of specialized vision systems for pilots increased from $1.66 million in 2007 to $6.24 million last year. The 275 percent growth brought the company's revenue back to its 2005 level, before the start of a three-year skid.

Chief Financial Officer Dylan Anderson said Max-Viz anticipates revenue this year of $9 million. A cautious aviation industry slow to upgrade aircraft with new equipment when proven technology exists is finally starting to replace older planes and helicopters. As it does, Max-Viz, which mainly sells to aircraft manufacturers, is poised for further growth.

The company reached profitability for 2009 by the fourth quarter, said Anderson, and should be profitable again this year.

With manufacturing outsourced, he said the company can scale up without adding additional employees to its 17-person workforce. Most of those employees focus on sales, marketing and research and development. Original equipment manufacturers of helicopters and general aviation airplanes are among Max-Viz's biggest customers. Major recent clients include Cessna and Eurocopter.

The company's core technology fuses different types of images that assist pilots in navigating challenging conditions. For example, an image might combine heat signatures seen by infrared cameras, visible light and night vision.

Though Max-Viz continues to research improvements to its systems, CEO Elliott Troutman said it will focus on its current product line for the foreseeable future because so much time is already required for the aviation industry to adopt new technology.

"Despite the fact that there is this miracle machine and everybody wants to fly, innovation is slow," he said. "Luckily, because we're so new, we have a long way to (go) before we ever penetrate the market."

Better understanding of Max-Viz's technology, cleared regulatory hurdles and a loosening international market have all stimulated the company's growth, Troutman said.

There are two categories of sensors in the avionics world — cooled and uncooled. One competitor, New Hampshire-based Kollsman, makes a cooled sensor package that works through pilots' heads-up displays, but those systems can cost $1 million or more, Anderson said. In contrast, Max-Viz's uncooled products cost between $15,000 and $125,000.

COURTESY OF MAX-VIZ INC.

A Max-Viz infrared sensor is set on the underside of a helicopter, below and to the right of the 'P'.

Someone who buys a multi-million dollar private jet might opt for the Kollsman system. On the other hand, fleets of smaller, less expensive general aviation aircraft create a high-volume market for Max-Viz because aircraft owners typically keep the cost of avionics below 10 percent of a plane or helicopter's total cost.

Despite the pattern of slow adoption in the industry, Max-Viz may grow by way of product improvements. Max-Viz's camera systems can't see through clouds, nor can they see through the thick dust thrown up by heavy military-style helicopters. Next steps include figuring out how to keep costs down while tackling such conditions.

"The holy grail for us is being able to give pilots the ability to land in a pea soup fog with no lights on in the middle of the night," Troutman said.

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