

# THE FRONT LINES

By THOMAS PETZINGER JR.

## Selling Golden Voices, An Entrepreneur Gets A Lesson in Technology

ALPHARETTA, GA.

**M**ARCUS GRAHAM is an ambitious and intelligent salesman. But it took technology to make him an entrepreneur.

Mr. Graham records telephone commands—"voice prompts"—for banks, retailers, cellular systems and other big companies that receive a lot of calls. Anybody with a microphone and a tape deck can do this work, and for years that's all Mr. Graham had. But now he and his staff of 17 operate in 20 countries with incomparable efficiency. "I can do anything a big company can do because of technology," he says.

Technology, however, is devoid of leadership. And as Mr. Graham learned in a brush with disaster, it doesn't provide an iota of business judgment.

Now 42 years old, Mr. Graham was always intent on making a living with his voice. While other kids watched Saturday-morning cartoons, he listened to Lone Ranger reruns on the radio. He immersed himself in Orson Welles recordings. He studied acting and elocution. He took a stab at stand-up comedy.

Though he struck out in entertainment, Mr. Graham found success in another performance art: selling. Truck-driving lessons, newsletters, radio spots—there was nothing he couldn't sell. The early days of cable television were especially remunerative. "I knocked on a billion doors," he says, "but I made a good living."

He never abandoned his interest in voice, however, opening a company on the side called G. Marcus Graham Productions—now GM Voices. Recording dial-in screening schedules for local theaters, he worked for movie passes instead of pay.

**H**IS BIG BREAK came from cable. When cable operators began forcing customers to dangle endlessly on hold, Mr. Graham convinced them they might as well provide a few programming messages to fill the time. Soon he was also providing on-hold messages for Delta Air Lines (for which he swears he invented the euphemism that "all agents are currently busy serving other customers"). As his business grew, he enlisted free-lancers to offer a wider range of voice talents.

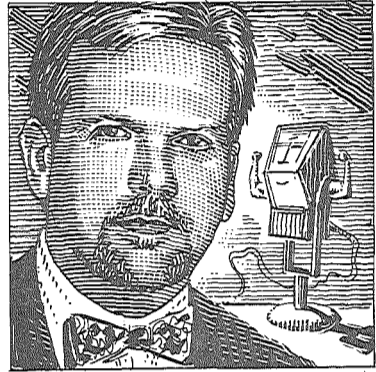
Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the advent of voice mail and the onslaught of downsizing began wiping out switchboard operators everywhere. Major corporations suddenly wanted professionally recorded voice-mail prompts. After years of having the field largely to himself, Mr. Graham found himself surrounded by competitors, including major telephone-system firms.

But technology, he found, could make GM Voices appear as big as that other GM. An \$8,000 computer-driven overhead projector "gave us instant credibility in selling to the Fortune 1000," he recalls. Later he shelled out \$150,000 for a promotional CD-ROM with snazzy animation and 40 minutes of spoken text, including voice samples and testimonials from customers. "You can't believe how many doors it opens," he says.

Printing technology was another boon: For as little as \$30 he could print a sales presentation customized to a prospect, so he printed a lot of them.

As his customers went global, technology permitted him to go with them. He engaged free-lance translators and voice talents the world over, hiring people in their home countries to assure his recordings were faithful to regional idioms and pronunciation, even to local dialects such as Quebecois.

By transmitting these recordings electronically, the company avoids the expense of international package



Elliott Barnfield

Marcus Graham

delivery as well as the time-consuming process of sending tapes through customs. In a matter of hours, GM Voices can schedule a session for Paris or Seoul, say, download the entire recording, edit away the lip noise and zap the final product into the voice-mail system of a client.

But one day a few years ago, Mr. Graham was shocked to realize that behind his glistening technology was a company in crisis. He had hired some expensive new marketing managers who didn't work out, and he lacked the reserves to pay their severance. He had spent everything on technology! Soon he found himself in court. His bookkeeper quit. The company was bouncing checks. "There were people who said this company wasn't going to make it," he says.

**H**E TURNED TO a loyal, long-time customer named Bill Flaherty, who had years of management experience in small and large corporations. As Mr. Flaherty saw it, the problem was obvious: "Whenever you become a slave to technology, you forsake basic business principles." While absorbed in all his gadgets and gewgaws, Mr. Graham had never bothered much with budgets, business plans and employee development.

Not that Mr. Flaherty had anything against technology. In fact, his prescription for GM Voices included installing a sophisticated software system to help sales reps set goals and monitor their own progress. This investment made sense because the potential payoff could be measured.

With Mr. Flaherty's help, Mr. Graham also began tracking finances more closely and hiring more thoughtfully. As a result, the company's revenue per employee has surged, to an estimated \$170,000 this year, extremely high for a service business of any size.

Though chastened, Mr. Graham remains committed to technology. He's now providing voice messages for Web pages. He set up a Web page for customers to check the status of their orders. His corporate intranet is one of the best I've seen.

But all these advances now occur in the wider context of a business plan. Says Mr. Flaherty: "Technology is now a tool rather than a master."