

Sitting pretty on high-tech parking spot

By Diane Weaver Dunne

He is the other Lazowski.

Not the rabbi. Nor the parking mogul. He is Barry Lazowski, who has quietly grown a multi-million-dollar enterprise, Control Systems, during the past 15 years in West Hartford. He also started a second software development business, ZipPark, three years ago.

This former medical doctor turned entrepreneur shuns the spotlight, while father Philip Lazowski is well-known as a local rabbi and author; brother Alan Lazowski has made his mark as the operator of more than 100 parking facilities on the East Coast.

The Hartford native, who attended local schools and the University of Connecticut, was headed into a career as an anesthesiologist when his brother Alan asked him to join Laz Parking in 1986.

The experience uncovered an appetite for entrepreneurship, and ever since, Barry hasn't looked back. Well, maybe he's looked back just for an hour, Lazowski quips.

"[Alan] offered me an opportunity to come in and that is the reason, actually, why I did it. I had come in at that point, but I just enjoyed business and decided, I am going to do this instead," he recalls.

Lazowski decided he wanted to go into a parking-related business since he cut his teeth in the field while at Laz Parking. However, with his bent toward work in technology and designing systems, he decided to focus on creating revenue control systems and technology solutions for parking vendors.

"I just enjoy selling, doing deals and delivering on promises. It's just the whole game of it. It's fun," Lazowski says.

And he's been having "fun" ever since. Upon his brother Alan's recuperation, Lazowski decided to carve out a niche in the \$26 billion parking industry in 1988 with Control Systems. He started with one employee and today the company employs 40.

"Control Systems is basically a value-added reseller of parking [revenue] and access systems," Lazowski explains. "We will take different products from different manufacturers, and design a system through them [to meet customer needs]."

The firm's future continues to be very promising, he says. "We've had growth spurts every year since we've been in business and there is still more to come. ... We are going to double our growth from now to 2005," Lazowski says. "We've actually been booming through a not-so-great period right now."



His stint with his brother's company taught him that there were a lot of needs not being met in the parking industry. For example, there is a huge theft problem because it is a cash-intensive industry, the second-largest cash business next to gambling, he explains. In one location in Boston where Control Systems installed a \$100,000 revenue control tracking system, it paid for itself in three months due to "the kind of theft that was going on."

Parking operators also save money by installing software programs that calculate differing rates which are dependent upon time-of-day and day-of-the-week schedules. This software "figures out" the varying rates, essentially automating and standardizing them for the attendant, reducing honest calculation errors, Lazowski says. Simply cutting down on such mistakes can generate enough revenues to pay for the system in a brief period, he says.



Locally, Lazowski's firm installed the state-of-the-art "Bucky" self-pay system at the city-owned Morgan Street Garage. At the time of its installation, Lazowski says, it was the only one of its kind on the East Coast.

"Morgan Street Garage has, probably, the most sophisticated system out there. They put a lot of money into it. ... This is something the City of Hartford should be proud of," Lazowski says, crediting city officials with having the foresight to install the system.

Although this type of pay-on-foot system has been popular in Europe for several years, it has since become more common here, he says.

Its advantage is that it not only tracks all revenue, but also removes the need for a cashier at the exit gates, which speeds up the egress from the garage from an average minute to three seconds, he explains. There are also the obvious savings from reduced staffing needs.

Initially, he was concerned that there would be a lengthy learning curve with customers, who might reject the system. However, that hasn't been the case. In fact, based on the ongoing influx of customers quickly paying their parking fees in the lobby of the Morgan Street Garage at the ATM-style "Bucky" machine last week, there appears to be no public rejection of this technology.

"It works wonderfully. It's not a problem," says Robert Bothell, an employee of WFSB-TV Channel 3, who frequently uses the garage. Martin Stein, executive director of the National Parking Association in Washington, D.C., says that these types of self-pay systems are becoming more common and that parking operators are taking advantage of the new technology now available.

"Technology has enabled us to do a variety of things, in addition to being more profitable. It affords us ways to better manage our people and better service our customers," Stein says. And the momentum and appeal of this and other forms of technology are on the horizon and in place, he adds.

Lazowski recognized this appeal 15 years ago when he founded Control Systems and he is counting on catching the next wave in the valet parking industry with his second company, ZipPark.

ZipPark produces Web-based handheld products, his brainchild of nearly 10 years ago. Inspiration for the products came about when he entered the New York City market, where there is a significant number of valet parking operations. He sat on the project for several years until



wireless Internet technology came of age and the firm was approached by a New York City hospital to develop a valet parking system for its new cancer treatment wing.

"They said, 'Look. We are not putting out [ticket] spitters or gates, so what can you do? 'So we came up with this prototype," he recalls.



The prototype has evolved into ZipPark's Windows-based product line. More than a revenue-control system, the firm's handheld device, similar to a Palm Pilot, is designed to be used by a parking attendant when greeting a customer. The attendant enters the car's license plate number with a stylus, storing the data on a Web-based application. On return visits, the system "remembers" customer names and car details, and includes a credit-card swipe that enables the customer to pay on the street.

The system also offers an in-lane camera that can take digital pictures of every angle of the car, to reduce false damage claims.

Although ZipPark has sold its products to a growing list of clients nationwide, including the Ritz-Carlton and Marriott hotel chains, heavy research and development spending have meant early-stage operating losses. However, Lazowski anticipates the venture will soon become profitable, predicting that ZipPark will eventually out-perform Control Systems.

Parking consultant Clyde Wilson, co-founder of the Parking Network with four offices nationwide, says the potential is there. "[Valet parking] is a wide-open market and a really big market," says Wilson.

The valet parking industry, as a whole, has yet to come into the electronic age, and still involves handwriting tickets and keeping cash in a lock box, Wilson explains. "It is a market that is ready for this technology," he adds, "especially when the prices get down to a point where they are willing to make the leap and try something new."

Working with Lazowski's firm on two occasions, Wilson initially recommended ZipPark's products to modernize the valet parking operation at Dulles International Airport in northern Virginia. Its valet parking attendants were still handwriting tickets for about 500 vehicles daily, and Wilson was hired to find a better way to track those cars and the operation's cash flow. The airport began using the system this past spring.

"It's been fabulous so far," says William Lanham, contract manager at Dulles International Airport, crediting the \$200,000 system for reducing costs, improving customer service and increasing productivity.

"At the time [when ZipPark was selected], they were one of the innovators of the system," Lanham says. "We obviously selected them for a reason, because they had a good product." From eliminating checkout lines that were once 30 people deep to significantly reducing credit card disputes and false liability claims, the system has revolutionized the valet parking operation, he explains.

Wilson, the parking consultant, also was impressed and selected ZipPark again to modernize another valet parking operation, this time at the historic Ferry Building in downtown San Francisco.

Wilson says the adoption of ZipPark's electronic devices, which are easy to learn and teach, has been swift and ultimately saves the operator money.

That same swift adoption rate of other technologies at public parking facilities by the general public is also encouraging, Lazowski says. "The good thing is, as the new technology has come on board, people are very with it. The more technology we bring into this area, people really embrace it. But, it's [an industry] that is still below the radar screen."

Lazowski says he looks forward to introducing new technology to the industry and the general public as it evolves from the firm's West Hartford headquarters.

Joking that he has moved a whopping 12 miles throughout his 47 years, from the Blue Hills area in Bloomfield to West Hartford, he finds his current location ideal.

"It works out quite well. It is very laid back. West Hartford is great. It takes me four minutes to get to work. And that's enough for me."

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