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Leigh Gauthier Savage

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POWER PLAYER: EDENS BUILDS ON ELECTRIC VEHICLE MOMENTUM

BRIAN EDENS HAS ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED by how things work. As a teen, he would pore over *Popular Science* magazine and build water wheels and generators with his dad, a fellow tinkerer. Even then, he knew that cars with the typical internal-combustion engines were problematic. "I didn't think it was sustainable long term, and this was before that word became popular," he says.

When General Motors came out with its first electric vehicle, the EV1, in 1996, Edens followed the story closely and saw how a combination of oil companies, car dealers and other vested interests — plus a general resistance to change — stopped the project in its tracks.

Edens, a 1994 Furman graduate, went on to build a successful career in technology sales, but never lost his interest in the automotive industry and, in particular, the move toward electric power. Now, he says, the time is right for electric vehicles to take off, and he's launched a company, Thurso Power Systems, in anticipation of the surge.

Thurso, based in Greenville, provides infrastructure for electric vehicles. The company opened an electric charging station in September in Greenville's West End — the first high-voltage charging station in the state — and Edens is working with a variety of clients, including The Spinx Co., Bon Secours St. Francis Health System, ScanSource and Mast General Store, to add more. He's also talking with companies in surrounding states and has plans to be a regional leader in the industry.

Edens says a variety of factors make this the right time for the move toward electric and hybrid vehicles. First, the green movement has gone mainstream, and more people are looking to reduce their environmental impact. The geopolitical aspect of dependence on the Middle East for oil has increased interest in finding alternatives, and last spring's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico sparked additional concern and discussion. And thanks to wireless phones and computers, battery power has made tremendous strides. Today lithium ion batteries allow electric vehicles to operate more efficiently than ever.

Automotive companies are taking notice, and Edens says the 2011 model year includes 10 electric

vehicles by major manufacturers. By 2012, there will be more than 20 producers of electric vehicles. The Chevy Volt, a plug-in hybrid, uses batteries for the first 40 miles after a charge, then has a gas-powered generator that can kick in if needed. The Nissan Leaf, a pure battery electric vehicle, is also gaining popularity.

"Every single Volt and Leaf made is already sold," Edens says.

He realized all the pieces of the puzzle were in place but one. "In my opinion, the thing that will make electric vehicles feasible for people to drive is to have an available and reliable charging network," he says. And



with his background in sales and technology, plus his knowledge of electrical construction gleaned from summer jobs as a student, he knew he had the skill set and drive to create a charging network.

"So after a few sleepless nights, I got up the courage to tell my wife I wanted to quit my cushy corporate job and go out on my own during the worst economy since the Great Depression," he says with a laugh.

"She was my first sale on the idea."

He lined up his former boss at Foxfire Software, John Sterling, as an investor, and contacted consultants such as Joachim Taiber, a research professor of electrical and computer engineering at Clemson University who focuses on clean transportation. A few months later,

Edens was installing his first charging station and had contracts for several more.

Edens points out that electric vehicles are not simply for "tree-huggers." He doesn't classify himself as such, but he is an avid outdoorsman and thinks of himself as a conservationist. "I think resources were put here for us to use, but we need to use them with common sense," he says.

While he appreciates the environmental benefits of electric vehicles, he also points to the significant cost savings. He drives a low-speed vehicle, or LSV, the 9.2 miles from his Greenville home to his downtown office each day. Basically a street-legal golf cart, the LSV adds only a few minutes to his daily commute and doesn't use a drop of gas. But he says the savings with electric vehicles only begin with gas. There is no need for oil, oil changes, air filters, radiators, radiator fluid, or other aspects of car maintenance. All things considered, he says, research shows that it costs about one-third less to drive an electric vehicle.

Edens, who majored in economics at Furman and played football for three years, says his college years prepared him well for his multifaceted career. "A liberal arts education is invaluable in anything," he says, "but especially in something like this, in that there are a lot of different aspects that come together — the technical side, computers, social, the environment. Being able to grasp different concepts is something a liberal arts education is all about."

Although the market for EV charging is rife with opportunity, Edens doesn't plan to stick with just one aspect of the business. He recently signed a contract to build a solar carport that's tied to an in-home EV charging station, and he's learning more about other related technologies. "I'm not limiting myself on where we can go with this," he says.

— LEIGH GAUTHIER SAVAGE

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The author, a 1994 graduate, is a freelance writer in Simpsonville, S.C. Photos by Jeremy Fleming.