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Forces of Change: Building business networks

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Building business networks

The architecture of the SDI Networks

complex in Greenville reflects the sophisticated youthfulness of John Ludwig '94 and his operation.

The buildings give visitors the feeling that they'll receive a warm, inviting welcome — the kind of customer service upon which SDI Networks (www.sdinetworks.com) relies for its success.

The word successful definitely defines SDI Networks. The company was ranked 241st on *Inc.* magazine's 2006 list of the 500 fastest growing private firms in the nation, and eighth on a similar list for state companies compiled by the S.C. Chamber of Commerce.

Founded in 2000, SDI (Systems Development and Integration) Networks offers businesses a variety of technological services, from hardware and software integration to network engineering, wireless infrastructure and project management. The Greenville office serves as corporate headquarters, with five other locations in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee.

For the employees — many of them Furman graduates — the SDI offices provide state-of-the-art amenities. Neatly manicured outdoor areas equipped with wireless Internet offer the opportunity for a refreshing break, or serve as an alternative work environment. Basketball goals provide the option for impromptu pickup games.

At the center of this not so corporate environment is Ludwig. One of the only members of his family ever to leave the rural community of Lincolnton, Ga., he believes some of his entrepreneurial initiative derives from his childhood on the family farm.

"The farmer is an entrepreneur," Ludwig says. "Back in the day, the farmer made his money from the land — what he could do, what he could sell. It was all very entrepreneurial."

When Ludwig graduated from Furman with a degree in business, he took a job selling computer components for a company called BSA. At the time the channels for selling computer technology were not very refined. Products were plentiful and demand was growing, but most of the rules for sales were not yet written — especially in regard to how to work with larger businesses interested in creating networks.

Ludwig found that he could offer companies a variety of services, from business development to sales and marketing. Within a year he had bought out his two partners in BSA. Before long, he says, thanks to "a lot of cold-calling, long hours and determination," the business had grown to 150 employees.

When BSA was bought in 2003, Ludwig launched his current venture. SDI was the kind of company Ludwig sold to while with BSA, so he understood how it should be structured.

"My employees are guided without much day-to-day guidance," says Ludwig, who was an offensive lineman on the Furman football team. "That's really a challenge that a lot of successful coaches and a lot of successful business people have: Everyone is treated differently, but everyone is treated equally."

He continues, "My talent is taking people that are individually talented, individually

motivated and who can handle autonomy — which can be a very dangerous thing," he says. "I get them into a system and let them do what they know how to do. You try to extract the hidden talents of your employees so those talents can shine."

Ludwig has also made a name for himself in Greenville through his community activities and interest in downtown development. In particular, SDI Networks has a close relationship with the Boys Home of the South, a home for abused and neglected boys. Because of his professional success and civic-mindedness, he received the 2006 Outstanding Young Alumni Award from Furman at Homecoming in the fall.

For now, Ludwig is looking to make his business "greener," with plans to install solar panels in his offices and to purchase hybrid vehicles. And he's fully aware that in business, "The only goal is to constantly have your finger on the pulse of the client. Job security is equal to customer satisfaction."

In terms of his entrepreneurial mind-set, he says, "Entrepreneurialism is not so much about intelligence or vision, but just hard work and determination to make something happen."

— JASON STRAND '04

