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Sonalysts at 40: Milestone for a sound business

By [Lee Howard](#) Day Staff Writer

Waterford - Sonalysts Inc. has brought the hush-hush to Hollywood.

Working with well-known personalities ranging from director Steven Spielberg to actor Anthony Hopkins to singer Alicia Keys, the company has remained true to its Navy submariner roots by keeping information about these stars' arrivals and departures a "silent service."

Stars don't have to worry about fawning fans or paparazzi showing up unexpectedly. Few Sonalysts employees - many already working secretly on their own projects - know until the day a star shows up that anything out of the ordinary is on the docket, said Muriel Hinkle, company co-founder with her late husband, David.

And, chances are, they are so wrapped up in their own intriguing work - ranging from video games and television commercials to cyber security and weather tracking - that they wouldn't take more than passing notice anyway.

"Dave believed in the Navy philosophy that you hire the best and the brightest," Hinkle said. "When you have bright people, they come with good ideas."

David Hinkle's best business idea may have been a commitment to diversification born from his experience as a young man growing up on a west Texas farm, where rotating different types of crops was the key to survival. The man once known in the Navy as Mr. Sonar quickly expanded Sonalysts to take on other Department of Defense work and, later, commercial applications.

Now, as the company celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, Sonalysts has up to 400 workers, many of whom are part of an employee stock ownership plan that gives them a say in the business. Employee-owners who want to head off in a new direction within the company merely have to petition Sonalysts' board to get the go-ahead.

"It's a wonderful way to grow a business," Hinkle said.

Hinkle still marvels at Sonalysts' beginnings in 1973. Her husband had just got out of the Navy when he started Sonalysts while attending law school at night.

Hinkle said her husband's initial plan was to kill the company after finishing law school, but by then he had 15 employees and decided a life in courtrooms and dark-paneled offices wasn't for him. His decision opened the way for the exponential growth of a company in which nearly everyone had a stake, a motivational force still alive today.

"We do this as a community or a family," said Jane Goldsmith, a longtime Sonalysts employee who retired just this month. "It gives each of us a greater sense of responsibility and commitment."

The responsibilities could involve anything from taking out the trash to arranging a social event. And Goldsmith, who formerly served as company spokeswoman, said nobody adheres to strict job responsibilities.

Business snapshot

What: Sonalysts Inc.

Where: 215 Parkway North, Waterford

Who: Muriel Hinkle, co-founder

Employees: 350 to 400

Founded: 1973

Phone: (860) 442-435

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Email: Inquiries@Sonalysts.com

"Having a title doesn't mean an awful lot here," she said. "If there's something that has to be done, just do it. ... If we do well, everyone benefits."

Defense work still represents somewhere between 60 and 75 percent of the company's revenues, said Hinkle, and perhaps half of those jobs are on classified projects for the military. Much of the defense work has to do with training, but Sonalysts also has a hand in unusual areas such as submarine-antenna repairs, added Fred Litty, a senior vice president for Sonalysts.

Yet Sonalysts is much better known for its Hollywood association, including the filming of the Supreme Court scene for Spielberg's well-received film, "Amistad," the story of a slave-ship rebellion that also brought movie crews to Mystic Seaport. Earlier, Sonalysts provided sound effects for another popular film, "The Hunt for Red October," based on the Tom Clancy novel.

The company, which has benefitted from Connecticut's attractive film tax credits, also received some buzz when one of its studios was used in 2009 to tape an entire season of "Deal or No Deal," a game show produced for NBC Universal and starring Howie Mandel.

More recently, the company's three studio spaces, encompassing about 27,000 square feet, have been active spots for producing infomercials, corporate videos and commercials. It also is popular among big-name acts looking for rehearsal space near the region's two casinos, Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun, where producers can work out staging and timing issues in relative obscurity.

"We are very careful about the privacy of our clients," Litty said.

But posters lining the hallways attest to some of the talent that has been in and out of the doors: Aerosmith, Mary J. Blige, Joe Cocker, John Legend, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra and the Dave Matthews Band, among others. In addition, rock star Jewel has sung at Sonalysts' recording studio, which was faithfully recreated based on the famed Power Station, owned by singer John Bon Jovi's cousin, Tony Bongiovi.

The talent inside of Sonalysts is impressive as well. During a tour of the post-production facilities, Curt Ramm, a horn player for Bruce Springsteen who performed most recently during The Boss's 2012-2013 "Wrecking Ball" tour, could be found working on an audio project.

In another area of Sonalysts, game producer Bob Kurzawa was overseeing the final test runs for a new arcade-style game called Near Impact that calls on competitors to protect the Earth from asteroids. He said the tester title employs a never-before-seen game engine that also could have applications in military training exercises involving satellites and missile defense.

"The commercial game market is hard to judge," Kurzawa said.

But, by making a game that can cross over into military training, Sonalysts has a fallback position, said Litty. It's a formula that the company rode to success with one of its earlier games, called Fleet Command, that also proved to be a commercial hit.

Elsewhere on Sonalyst's compact campus, the company's Aviation Information Systems Group runs 24/7, providing real-time displays of weather patterns across the country. "Weather is probably the cause of 95 percent of operational difficulties (among airlines)," said Josh Rovero, a group leader for the so-called wXstation.

Not far away, Owen McCusker, principal analyst for Sonalysts' cyber security division, showed off a computer screen that he called a "cyber MRI," referring to the magnetic resonance imaging that hospitals perform to look inside the bodies of patients. In this case, the patented scan is a color-coded depiction that shows the likelihood of a computer-security problem within a network.

"It's been getting a lot of attention," said McCusker, who gave a talk about the technology during

a NATO summit in Estonia last June.

Perhaps the best example of Sonalysts as a diversified company, though, can be found not far from Studio 15, its largest production space, encompassing 15,000 square feet of space. It's here where Sonalysts builds sets for movie studios, music-video producers and television networks, but it's also where the company hosts a growing trade-show business, building displays for a variety of major corporations.

The trade-show division arose with the necessity of being a one-stop shop to attract video production, but the problem is that studio work, while lucrative, comes and goes unpredictably. To keep set designers and carpenters working year-round, Sonalysts had to reinvent itself once again by taking on different kinds of projects than it had in the past.

"We had to find a synergy between our analysis work and our trade-show work," Litty said. "Luckily, we have a whole bunch of diversified people."

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