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Photograph by George Sakkestad

SoloPoint SmartCenter products don't look like much, but they can handle a number of tasks. Company officers are (from left) Art Chang, COO; Don Nanneman, vice president of product marketing; Ed Esber, CEO; Ron Tchorzewski, vice president of finance; and Bryan Kerr, vice president of sales.

SoloPoint SmartCenter does lots of neat tricks

By Clarence Cromwell

Your cell phone rings, and you're not sure if it's the call you've been waiting for, or a nuisance message. You flip open the phone and listen in as the caller leaves a message on your voicemail. It's the call you've been waiting for, so you press "1" on the phone and start talking.

That's not the only trick the SoloPoint SmartCenter can do, but it's the neatest.

The SmartCenter is a piece of electronic hardware the size of a thin book, made in Los Gatos, that rests unobtrusively underneath an office phone; it adds tons of professional polish to the smallest company's phone persona by offering a touch-tone menu of voicemail, office phone extensions, faxes, pagers or other phone numbers. The SmartCenter lets callers try alternate extensions, one after another, to find the target of the phone call--rather than get beamed immediately into someone's voicemail box or to an unanswered phone in a closet somewhere. A customer calling the office can choose among such options as leaving a message, trying the cell phone or transferring to another person in the office, for example.

Another feature lets the busy owner of SmartCenter program the machine to offer a special menu for certain callers. The machine would recognize an important customer, by caller ID technology, and could offer the person additional menu choices: the caller ID could be a gateway to home phone extensions or to the professional's cellular phone.

The little \$495 box allows busy professionals to get all their calls wherever they go, even if they don't take the call. And they only have to give out one number--the one that leads to the box.

"It's important to understand that our calls go beyond forwarding," Chief Operating Officer Art Chang said. "Forwarding just gets the call where you are. We let you manage the call."

SoloPoint, the manufacturer of the SmartCenter, aims its marketing efforts at professionals with small offices or with offices at home--people with a small budget who need to appear just as professional as a big corporation with deep pockets.

The SmartCenter is sold at Office Depot stores, including the Lark Avenue Store in Los Gatos. The company also sells a scaled-down \$199 model, called SmartMonitor, that transfers calls to one alternate number and lets you screen your calls, without the fancy touch-tone menu.

A couple of seasoned high-tech wizards report to work at SoloPoint's headquarters on Knowles Drive. Chief Executive Officer Edward M. Esber, for instance, started his career at IBM and Texas Instruments, where he launched the first spreadsheet and database software for PC-based computers. Chang, the COO, co-founded Parallan Computers and once held management positions at Bell Laboratories, Wyse Technology and PLX Technology.

All the company's research and development, engineering and manufacturing are done in Los Gatos.

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