Portfolio

Signs of growth for Milwaukee firm

► SIGN LANGUAGE is the key to Adaptive Micro Systems' success in the LED industry. The Wisconsin company makes visual display boards that are used in applications as diverse as retail promotion, transportation information and factory automation. Each time a customer uses an Adaptive unit to get its message across, it helps the $44 million company continue its spectacular growth, which has been a healthy 52 percent since 2002.

Though light-emitting diodes have been around for quite a while—Adaptive's two founders started the privately held company in a Milwaukee garage in 1978—recent improvements in LED capabilities have helped Adaptive soar in its particular market niche. The diodes can now produce all three primary colors, for instance. And linking them to high-tech communication methods, such as satellite hookups, enables users to broadcast real-time messages across broad areas.

"Suppose you own a 100-outlet hamburger chain, and this morning you decide to advertise a 99-cent special on french fries. With our units at each store, and a satellite hookup, you can have all your reader boards displaying the same message in seconds," explains vice president of marketing Gary Close.

This instantaneous messaging ability benefits users of Adaptive devices in airports, where signboards catalog flight times and gates; in factories, where they provide feedback to workers on assembly lines; on highways, where they convey traffic warnings to drivers.

The latter use illustrates a particularly advantageous fact of the company's units: They can be dropped into existing magnetic tile installations, affording an inexpensive retrofit. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation is an Adaptive customer for this type of application.

Adaptive manufactures components at a plant in Malaysia, and assembles them at its main facility in Milwaukee, where 200 full-time workers turn out units as small as 18 inches, or as big as a semi trailer (40 feet). About a quarter of the company's sales, $10 million, are made directly to business customers. The retail end of the spectrum is represented by the thousands of smaller units Adaptive sells through Sam's Club stores and sign dealers.

COURTESY ADAPTIVE MICRO SYSTEMS

LED technology has been adapted to many uses by Adaptive Micro.

Although it is a manufacturing company, Close says Adaptive has a keen appreciation of what it is really selling—information capability.

"We're in the communications business. America has become an exceedingly mobile society, and the need for instant information is growing exponentially," Close observes. Though he does not expect another year of growth past 50 percent, Close believes the technology's potential is huge. "This is just the beginning for this business," he predicts. In other words, the company's future is as bright as its signs.

—Eric Lucas

Starry, starry night—in digital format

► **Carl Sagan's famous remark about the profusion of stars ("billions and billions") comes to electronic life this year when the Milwaukee Public Museum installs state-of-the-art laser projection and computer image-rendering equipment in its IMAX Dome Theater. Sixteen processors will feed as many as 16 million pixels to the dome screen, providing the audience 360-degree views of virtually any object in space. Scheduled for completion by January, the project will make the dome one of the most sophisticated planetariums in the world. For information please visit www.mpm.edu. *—Kurt Lubinski***

► **Light-emitting diodes (LEDs) are essentially semiconductors that produce visible light when a current passes through them. Their properties have been known since the early 20th century; infrared LEDs are the key to remote controls.**