

# view from the top

## Light Years Ahead

Bill Linkow, President, FiberPlex

by Fred Goodman

In 1963, Bill Linkow, president of FiberPlex, began his career at optical fiber specialist Versitron. When the founders sold the company in the late 1980s, Linkow envisioned starting his own company in partnership with Harry Oliver, a fellow engineer at Versitron. In December 1987, FiberPlex was incorporated with former Versitron employees, including Linkow, Oliver, James King and his son, Bill, as well as Emmet Jones and Ron Reifsteck (both now deceased).

Linkow recalls, "It's a classic start-up story. We used our homes as collateral for financing the company (and my dogs and cats as security officers). Literally, we started the company in my home. The engineering department was in the basement, the machine shop was in the garage and the living room was used for packing and shipping. The initial partners spent many long days and many months designing and manufacturing our first fiber-optic products. These products were based on our experience with the secure communications markets, principally with U.S. governmental and military customers. As the company took root, we had a pressing need for more space." The founders eventually hired a handful of key employees and moved FiberPlex to its present location in Annapolis Junction, MD, in 1989.

The company's decision to enter the pro audio business came about in a very straightforward way. Harry Oliver's son, Buddy, who had an audio engineering degree, approached Linkow about designing a fiber-optic pro audio product. Buddy had already worked for several years at FiberPlex managing other projects and was well aware of its capabilities with sophisticated fiber-optic components. Linkow adds, "He was certain that fiber optics could fill a pressing need to transport high-quality digital audio and replace antiquated, analog copper wire snakes. The technology Buddy and I spoke about implementing just wasn't feasible from an economic standpoint at that time."

Then, in early 2004, the company saw the time was ripe to succeed in a non-governmental commercial market, so the decision was made to proceed with the development of what would become the LightViper digital audio snake.

Linkow cites his involvement in the early development of fiber optics (using fiber bundles and the use of the first lab-created LEDs

developed at Texas Instruments) as a fertile background for what he accomplished at FiberPlex. "When combined with my years in other engineering disciplines," he states, "my specific background experience with fiber optics has helped us in the development of pro audio products."

FiberPlex today has a few less than 100 employees and occupies a 15,000-square-foot facility. The employees are divided into four working groups: engineering, sales, manufacturing and administrative services. Managerially, FiberPlex is a collaborative effort, consulting with each other frequently. "Like most small technical firms," Linkow points out, "in addition to our corporate titles, three of the principals have a job with 'engineer' in the title. Our manufacturing manager previously worked at Versitron also and now manages a complex manufacturing process; FiberPlex makes several hundred different configurations of fiber-optic components."

Linkow continues, "Our chief engineer began his career at Comsat and has a talented engineering staff reporting to him—even myself! We have a sales manager for our non-LightViper, core FiberPlex component products. When we started the LightViper product line, we needed a seasoned sales manager with experience in the professional audio business. We were fortunate to hire Sam Spennacchio, who has set up a sales network throughout the country and has also taken the company into international markets."

Linkow explains that his management principles are based on those of Hewlett-Packard. His former employer at Versitron, Pete Meisinger, admired HP's principles and transferred a strong, ethical work philosophy to all his employees, just as Linkow does now. "When I'm faced with a business problem, I often ask myself, 'What would Pete do?' Linkow explains. "I strongly believe in managing an ethical business based upon respect for employees, the design and manufacture of superlative products, and providing superior customer support. I have such confidence in our people and products that FiberPlex still offers lifetime warranties."

How does Linkow fit in with the team? "Like many principals of small companies, I fill many roles," he says. "My experiences on the assembly line, as a technician and as an engineer, provided invaluable background for my present position. I've been able to dele-



gate many responsibilities to competent employees, but as Harry Truman said, 'The buck stops here.' One aspect of my work that I have enjoyed lately is doing mechanical design. In this role, I recently completed an important design for a new LightViper product. Buddy Oliver (now director of pro audio) and I deliberately share an office in order to collaborate more effectively on our mutual vision for the LightViper product line."

FiberPlex designs and manufactures secure communication equipment for a number of markets. According to Linkow, the future markets for LightViper (and even some FiberPlex products) will be, as he puts it, "Any venue or application where a small fiber-optic cable can replace a larger and less-efficient copper one. Because much higher information throughput can be achieved on fiber than is possible on copper wire, the future of communications—in virtually all commercial business applications including AV transport—lies in the much greater bandwidths that fiber offers. Because of its inherent dielectric properties, too, fiber is totally immune to virtually all types of outside interference."

Linkow is realistic when it comes to dealing with the competition. "We must assume we will always have competitors," he notes. "We must also assume that our products will not always be the lowest-priced. Our competitive edge thus far has been in providing extremely reliable, high-quality, high-performance products at a reasonable cost. Further, our lifetime warranty, excellent customer support and responsiveness to user needs add additional value."

In fact, Linkow readily acknowledges that his company's customers and end-users

drive product development. He reports, "We host conferences with customers that allow them to give us critical input for our product design. We recently entered into an agreement with a major audio products manufacturer to design plug-in fiber-optic interface cards for their digital mixing consoles. These cards accept our LightViper fiber-optic terminations and translate the company's proprietary bus interface protocol." The company has also recently introduced software that can control remote microphone preamps from personal computers, ideally over a fiber network.

The future at FiberPlex looks bright, indeed. "We are in the process of designing the next generation of our pro audio products," Linkow concludes. "We believe this will advance the use of fiber optics as a solution to audio, video, lighting, telephony and digital control problems. Our next generation is already being designed for throughput at 2.5 Gbs with data rates in future systems at 10 Gbs and above. This will allow us not only to transport audio but HD video as well. Our objective is to establish a platform that will serve as a conduit for a vast amount of information with a large variety of protocols."

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