

Shining Example

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One solar step at a time, Robert Reynolds and Solis Energy can help light the way for aspiring entrepreneurs everywhere.



Robert Reynolds readily concedes he once knew little about solar energy. So he went to school, almost literally.

Reynolds had agreed to team with his teenage son on a summer project that involved creating a solar unit to generate power in their home's Florida room. Reynolds bought the requisite solar panels and batteries. He Googled and asked business associates. And he goofed up, a lot.

"I think everything we could have done wrong we did at the start. It was essentially starting from scratch and learning," he says, recalling the lessons of 2005.

Ultimately, the system worked. Only, that initial bit of success led to failure.

Later that summer, his day job as a telecommunications consultant took him to Martin County, where he learned that in the wake of 2004's historic hurricane season, officials wanted to use some remaining money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to employ solar energy for use on radio towers. Characteristically intrigued by business opportunity, he pulled together a plan to meet those needs but made an ill-fated proposal. The project had to be installed within a month or the FEMA money would be lost. There was no time.

There was, however, a spark: Solar could be used to power equipment in remote places. And, unlike other typical photovoltaic systems, those standalone units could store unused energy in batteries instead of being tied to an electric grid.

Done.

Today, Altamonte Springs-based Solis Energy is a privately held provider of outdoor power generation, connectivity and emergency/secondary backup solutions for all low-voltage applications. In essence, the company's products allow industrial and commercial customers to continuously power critical low-wattage applications and electronic devices — including security/surveillance cameras, Wi-Fi hotspots, WiMAX radios, telemetry equipment, power conditioning, computer and traffic monitoring systems — any time and any place grid-supplied electricity is either unavailable or unreliable.

Its product suite represents an alphabet soup of solar technology: SSP (Solar Power Plant), CPB (Continuous Power Bridge), UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply), LPT (Streetlight Power Tap Adaptor) and PSI (Dual Power over Ethernet Splitter/Injector).

Locally, Solis solutions can be found, among other places, on the West Orange Trail, as well as at the Orange County Convention Center, the Orlando Executive Airport and the Orlando International Airport. Solis products are used in the Everglades, too, and are distributed globally.

Most recently, Solis made its first foray into the retail arena, introducing the Power HotSpot, a solar-powered product that can run small, 12-volt “noncritical” electronics anywhere, in remote locations or places where grid power isn't available. All that's required is an electronic device with a car power adaptor (cigarette lighter interface) and the sun.

Working with Duane Roberts, the company's founding director and head of product engineering — by contrast a true tech guy — Reynolds has gone from his lanai project to a relative leadership position in an industry that is, pun very much intended, heating up.

Clearly, those facts make nice brochure copy. Shine a flashlight (solar powered) on the background, though, and you'll see some pretty savvy business strategy. Maybe even a bit of inspiration.

Fact is, Reynolds' unlikely rise in the solar industry serves notice to entrepreneurs large, small and not quite there yet. To borrow from an old phrase, if Reynolds can do it, who's to say anyone else can't?

Call it emblematic entrepreneurial effort.

In the early 1990s, Reynolds worked for the city of Orlando in information technology before scratching an entrepreneurial itch. He departed to try his hand at consulting.

First, he played a critical role in launching international operations for a Canadian-owned technology company. Then he designed, developed and deployed an advanced Internet Protocol and Ethernet Services product portfolio for a wholesale provider of bandwidth and IP services. Just prior to Solis, he was an executive consultant, developing business services and processes for several technology companies.



No part of that resume put him in a particularly strong position to take charge of a solar company. Yet, along with a willingness to learn, he had at least two other key attributes: the ability to spot a niche and the nerve to dive in after it.

While solar, in itself, is a segment of the larger green-energy industry, Reynolds further narrowed his solar focus to the area of capital expenditures instead of operating expenses. Largely, solar has been used to reduce electric bills by employing the sun to generate power that is tied to an electric grid system. Conversely, Solis' products are off-grid, located in places that are beyond any electric grid. Extending a grid into a remote place is an "extremely expensive proposition," Reynolds says, one that, for example, might require the digging of trenches and the

pulling of copper wire to link with the grid. He offers an alternative. “We can save on capital expenses,” he says with conviction.

Such belief made his decision to eschew IT consulting for energy solutions easy for the 46-year-old. He is an enthusiast of camping, boating and waterskiing, sure, but not jumping out of airplanes. Sometimes, however, you simply have to take a leap of faith, he contends: “You could overanalyze until there’s no tomorrow on making a decision, until everything is absolutely perfect. But once you realize there’s a reasonable opportunity, and you’ve got the personality to stick with it, take the jump and give it that shot. You only have a couple of those in your lifetime. Take them when you can.”

Just not alone. For assistance, he’s put together an advisory panel of small business colleagues to discuss ideas, issues and concerns. Also, with several neighbors in tech-rich Seminole County engaged in solar activities, he has elected to forge local partnerships, even with some competitors. “There’s a significant growth industry right in this area here [Seminole County],” he comments. “We’re all kind of tapping into different parts of that market as its developing. There’s plenty of room for opportunity in a market that’s growing like this.

“[There may be] some businesses overlap, but there can be greater benefits by working together.”

The strategy of working with nearby companies has paid dividends. Solis’ first big break came by doing business with F4W Inc., a software development company located right down the street in Lake Mary.

F4W deployed a Solis power plant to power a radio system. At the time, F4W was working closely with Motorola, which subsequently requested a solution for an outdoor battery backup system for one of its radios. “With a little bit of scratching our heads and research, we came back with a yes,” says Reynolds. That provided a leap into expansion. Through Motorola, Solis was able to tie into Anixter, which has turned into a global distribution partner.

By the end of 2005, Solis had two test projects in place. In 2006, they were inching forward, despite Reynolds’ mother’s death and his wife’s extended hospitalization — personal lives, of course, are part of any business equation. During 2007 and 2008, more distributors were added, along with a couple of employees. Last year, revenues nearly hit \$1 million, and Solis now employs six people, including both principals, by no means worthy of headlines but nonetheless telling. Perhaps not quite thriving, Solis is surviving and poised for growth.

“His products are all about tomorrow, which is something we want to be part of,” comments Jim Anderson, sales manager for another of Solis’ local connections, Artisan Industries in Lake Mary, which fabricates a variety of metal components. “That’s where every company wants to be — part of the future. ... This is a sweet spot to be in.”

And now, with the Power HotSpot, the retail market beckons. At the workplace, the HotSpot can recharge tools, notebook computers and cell phones or provide power to inverters for AC power. At home, it can power a shed or gazebo light, an aerator or a fountain. For recreation, it can bring

convenience to a campsite for applications ranging from recharging lights to providing continuous play for iPods.

Five years in, Solis is finding solace in solar.

The next breakthrough could be just over the horizon. In partnership with Orlando-based Green Notions, an environmentally focused innovations developer headed by local attorney/entrepreneur Steve Korshak, Solis is exploring remote-location power solutions using hydrogen and fuel cells — an advancement beyond solar.

Korshak is encouraged. “Solar and alternative energy is a huge field,” he says. “It’s not like there will be one product that will change the whole alternative-energy field. The changes will probably come in little pieces, niches. Robert has a number of areas where he’s been good at doing that. He goes into niches.”

Reynolds, as he typically does, maintains a low-key big-picture posture. “I believe over the next three to five years that technology is going to be evolving significantly,” he comments. “It’s already more widely used [abroad]. It’s a matter of time before that technology starts building here. And we don’t want to fall behind the curve. We want to be aware of where the technology is going, how it will impact our business and how we take advantage of it.”

Indeed, Reynolds finds comfort in careful calculation, much as he did in that summer of 2005 with son Cody. Given the volatility of running a small business, his levelheadedness serves him well. Yet, those traits have been tested, particularly when it comes to money.

“Capital is always an issue,” he says. “Cash flow is always an issue, and credit was an issue for a while.” Reynolds leveraged the business with short-term debt, even with credit cards. “You get out of [debt] for a while; then the next project comes up. It floats back and forth,” he adds.

Although Solis’ tide appears to be rising — in business, who can ever be certain, right? — challenges remain. Or, as Reynolds describes, “It’s not for the faint of heart to go down this path.

“We take two steps forward and one step back. Occasionally, it’s two steps forward and three steps back. ... Some days I think we’ve done more. And some days I wonder why we’ve only gotten this far. It’s a little bit of a pendulum.”

For Solis, and just for starters, the challenges include selling the company brand to prospective customers, in addition to teaching about industry technology and proposing innovative uses. “There’s a constant education you have to provide out there,” he says.

There’s self-education, too, like about giving retail a whirl: “That’s a part of owning your own business — you learn a lot every day. Every time is a new challenge.”

No complaints, though.

Reynolds loves the idea of someday sailing to the Caribbean. Only, he's too busy today selling to the Caribbean. Playful research brought intriguing discovery, which pointed him toward the sun and led to the hot pursuit of business opportunity.

Reynolds relishes the moment. "The journey," he concludes, "is half the fun."

And it could happen to anyone.

8 Secrets of Success

The Robert Reynolds way:

1. Take the step. Get into a venture and move forward.
2. Structure as much of your operations as you can. Establish procedures for each step of your operation.
3. Get your name out in as many places as possible, and talk to as many people as you can about your product or service – with a consistent message.
4. Develop outside relationships and keep them positive, whether with customers or vendors.
5. Provide a reliable product or service.
6. Do what's right for everybody in the process – your people, customers and vendors.
7. Take advantage of new technology, including communication vehicles such as Facebook and Twitter.
8. Don't hesitate to contract out to people who can do it better than you. It's worth the investment to use your time elsewhere.