

# **Tedricks celebrate 25 years of service as Answer Midwest hits 70th anniversary**

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**ALTON** - When the Tedrick family bought **Answer Midwest** in 1991 the answering service had 150 customers. Today, as the company celebrates its 70th Anniversary, there are nearly 1,000 customers from all over the country who depend on the Alton business for around-the-clock customer service.

“With each advance in technology over the years people have told me this industry would die,” says Gary Tedrick, president. “Instead, we have used each new communications tool to make our clients more efficient at responding to their customers and we have grown.”

The company started as a physician’s exchange in 1946. Back then Margaret Weber used a note pad and pencil to take phone messages for doctors.

Now there are 17 high-tech customer response stations where Answer Midwest operators can schedule appointments, dispatch technicians, access data to answer questions, or whatever is needed for an immediate personalized response.

Whether the contact comes in as a rollover call when office phone lines are busy or as a call or email at 2 a.m., customers get a friendly, live person answering their questions. The more automated the world becomes, the more people like a personal response, according to Tedrick.

“Business is coming to us literally from coast to coast and border to border,” he says. “Companies that serve customers nationwide like the fact that Midwesterners don’t have an accent and we can provide services so affordably.”

The potential for national growth in phone services was not something the family anticipated in 1991 when Tedrick and his wife Lee Ann were looking for a business to invest in for retirement. In fact, Gary says that after 12 years with Southwestern Bell and AT&T, telephone work was the last thing he wanted to do. He was looking at a self-service car wash.

Then someone at church mentioned that the current owner, Vera Randolph, wanted to sell her answering service and it just seemed to be too appropriate not to explore. As it turned out, Gary’s knowledge of the technology paired with Lee Ann’s experience as an administrative assistant was a winning combination.

“It has been just the right mix of skill and technical knowledge to help our customers grow their organizations,” said Tedrick. “Having a bright daughter join the family business hasn’t hurt either.”

Their daughter, Jennifer Schulz, left a job working with Edward Jones on the trading floor to come to Answer Midwest in 1996. Her responsibilities have grown along with the company. Now as vice president, she is leading the efforts to make Answer Midwest a national leader in their industry.

It seems to be working. Answer Midwest has been recognized for exceptional service by the Association of TeleServices International (ATSI), which represents some of the most sophisticated telephone service agencies in the world that together generate revenue in excess of \$1 billion.

In 2015 ATSI awarded Answer Midwest the Diamond Plus Award for achieving their top level of recognition for 14 consecutive years. Only 11 services in the world have ever won as many consecutive years as Answer Midwest.

“We are able to provide exceptional service because we have such incredible people working with us,” says Schulz. “We just feel so blessed, to see all the hard work pay off is extremely gratifying.”

The company has grown from seven people working at three answering consuls in 1991 to 30 people and 17 consuls in 2015. Additional expansions in the office at 307 Henry Street are currently underway according to Schulz.

She says the growth is even more amazing when you think about how much more the Internet allows one operator to do. Answer Midwest has made 5 system upgrades since the Tedricks bought the business.

Appointment books and data are shared instantly, translation is available for more than 100 languages, operators can take orders, serve as a help desk, make reminder calls or even take emergency medical calls with long-term record keeping and full HIPPA compliance.

“Whether the client is an independent local business owner or a big national company, we can see that their staff has more time to work and fewer interruptions by efficiently taking over or supplementing customer service responsibilities,” said Schulz.

In response, businesses have voted Answer Midwest Best in Customer Service, Best in Quality, and/or Best in Value in the St. Louis Small Business Monthly newspaper for the last five years.

As Tedrick looks toward retirement he says he couldn't have asked for more out of life or the decision to buy the business 25 years ago. He has especially enjoyed being able to serve and be part of the Alton business community. He sees the next generation holding great promise.

“I can’t begin to say how proud I am of the quality of our team at Answer Midwest and their potential as technology moves us into a more national arena,” said Tedrick. “It’s an honor for me to step back and watch them work, I am expecting great things.”