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## New telecom products to fuel Asher's growth

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Six-year-old Asher Computing Inc.—predicting 40 percent revenue growth for 2001—has doubled its staff.

Along with consulting and outsourcing capabilities, Asher Computing is banking on a new telecommunications product that it hopes no small business will be caught without.

Asher Computing, formerly known as Sam Asher Computing Services Inc., is a privately held company founded in 1995 by local software developer Samuel Asher. The company specializes in telecommunications and networking projects. It creates systems that integrate communications equipment and technology such as faxes, e-mail, computers and telephones.

Begun as a single-person operation, the company now has 44 employees. Asher predicts that fiscal 2001 will see revenue in the mid-seven figures.

The company employs staff that work in-house on contract projects. The company also has a bank of information technology and computer science workers it hires out to other companies.

Asher Computing introduced its latest offering in March. It provides interactive voice response applications for small businesses. For example, a small retailer might want to offer a shop-by-phone menu of options for customers. Asher Computing will set up the system for the retailer so callers can order products by phone, with the company handling all the software and

hardware needs.

The retailer pays a per-transaction fee. This means no overhead for a small retailer and the ability to compete with the phone capabilities of the bigger concerns.

"We take the orders, then feed them to the fulfillment systems," Asher said. "Smaller businesses can take advantage of the same resources that larger businesses can afford to own themselves."

The company is developing another generation of the same type of service, for larger clients—"a high-end, database transaction system that can process 100,000 transactions per second," Asher said.

Asher went into business after a career in computer systems that included a stint at the University of Rochester. While at UR, he took classes in the William E. Simon Graduate School of Business Administration. That experience energized his entrepreneurial side.

"It was like waking up," he said.

His first solo projects were developmental programming.

"When each department in a company has a different computer system," he said, "we would write code to connect the different languages of the systems."

Through projects with telecommunications companies such as Nortel Networks Corp., Asher honed a specialty in telephone projects.

Asher Computing recently completed a demonstration model of a second-generation, voice-activated database system that connects wireless telephone users to their

personalized Nortel Web sites.

"We have worked with Asher for many years," said Linda Donovan, Nortel's manager of personalization and advertising. "This new product connects the wireless world with the Web."

Through the system, a wireless-phone user can dial in and, with a spoken word command, hear stock quotes, sports scores, phone numbers or other information that he or she has indicated on a personal Nortel Web page.

The voice command enters a database created by Asher Computing in a previous Nortel project. It pulls out the information, processes it and returns the information to the user with a voice answer.

"If you say 'call dentist,' the system will dial it for you," Donovan said. "Asher had to fulfill requirements with this system that we hadn't thought of yet. And they did it in an abbreviated time frame."

Not all of business is a creative engineer's bed of roses, Asher said. Telecommunications was a soft industry in 2000.

"We had been growing like gangbusters; then last year, we had a terrible year," he acknowledges.

But with the new product and renewed interest in its services, Asher is gambling on the growth of the business.

"There are countless applications for what we do," he said. "What we do here is take creative, unformed ideas, then convert them into products that have a business value."

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