

## In the News...

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# Hunter: an engineer with business in his blood

by **Kevin Robinson-Avila**

*NMBW staff*

Having come from a family of entrepreneurs that stretches back two generations, it's little wonder Lem Hunter became a businessman.

But while his family instilled an entrepreneurial spirit in him, Hunter's natural talent as an engineer coupled with an almost innate business savvy has made him a particularly successful entrepreneur. He built Mechtronic Solutions Inc. (MSI) -- a \$3.5 million engineering and light electronics firm -- from scratch. He now heads a new startup, Vibrant Corp., which just received \$1 million in seed funds from angel investors.

But despite his achievements, Hunter remains a humble man who insists that great mentors and sheer luck got him where he is today.

"I'm the luckiest guy you're ever gonna meet," he says. "I'm largely the product of a handful of people who have chosen to invest time and energy in bringing me along as a businessman."

While mentors did contribute to his success, those who know him say his achievements are his own doing.

"I think he'd be successful at anything he chooses to do," says J.T. Michelson, one of Vibrant's investors. "He has real skills as an entrepreneur and as an engineer. He selects experienced partners and employees, and he's a good listener and leader."

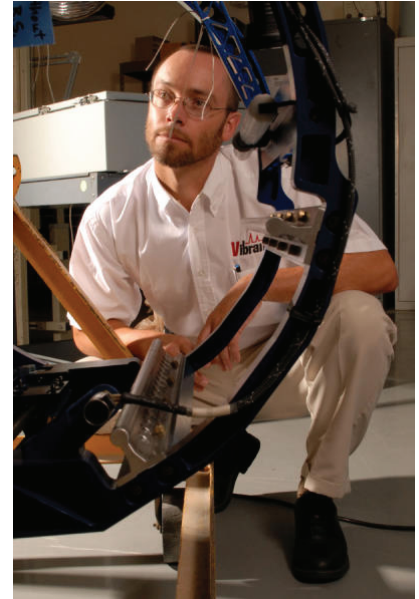
MSI CEO John Spruce says Hunter makes his partners and employees feel valued.

"For him, the people come first," Spruce says. "People are not just a number here. He's able to quickly grasp the needs of customers, partners and employees and then he makes the effort to meet those needs."

Ironically, Hunter was not much of a student. A native of Southern California, Hunter graduated from high school in 1982, but didn't earn his degree in mechanical engineering until 10 years later. He took classes on and off at two different universities and two community colleges in California before enrolling at the University of New Mexico in 1988.

"It took five schools and two states to finally get my bachelor's degree from UNM," Hunter says. "I bounced around for years at hodgepodge jobs."

He pumped gas, worked at a gym and a daycare center, and even tried his hand at auto mechanics with the goal of working on race cars. His career as an engineer didn't begin until the mid-1980's, when he joined his uncle's sprinkler factory in San Diego.



After building Mechtronic Solutions into a \$3.5 million engineering and light electronics firm, Lem Hunter is now working to get his new startup company, Vibrant Corp., launched and on its way.





3801 Academy Parkway North, NE  
Albuquerque, NM 87109

Tel +505-314-1488  
Fax +505-821-5210

[www.vibrantndt.com](http://www.vibrantndt.com)

"When I finally started working in engineering, I realized that to go further I needed to go back to school," Hunter says. "I loved designing and building machinery, so I bit the bullet and went on to earn my degree at UNM."

After graduating, it seemed a natural path for Hunter to start his own business given his family's long entrepreneurial history. Hunter's paternal grandfather owned a foundry and his maternal grandfather a citrus farm. His father and uncles ran an aluminum products business after World War II that specialized in venetian blinds. That firm was eventually sold off and later became HunterDouglas -- one of the largest window covering manufacturers in the world.

"I've been surrounded my entire life by entrepreneurs," Hunter says. "Dinner conversations were always about banking and customers. All that made it pretty natural for me to go into business."

Hunter started in 1993 as an independent contract engineer working out of his home in Albuquerque. At the time, he faced little competition, allowing his business to rapidly grow.

"There weren't a lot of prototype fabrication companies in New Mexico back then, so I fit a real niche," Hunter says.

Within two years, his company, Hunter Engineering, reached \$300,000 in revenue and six employees.

In 1995, the business moved to its first commercial space -- a 2,000-square-foot facility in the North Jefferson business corridor. It expanded to 5,000 square feet in 1997, and in 2004 it moved to its current 20,000-square-foot location on Academy Parkway. The firm, now called Mechtronic Solutions Inc., has 32 employees.

MSI manages a mix of commercial and government engineering projects, including ongoing contracts with Sandia National Laboratories. The company was named as one of Sandia's nine "strategic suppliers" in 2005.

With MSI well-established, Hunter has decided to pursue new horizons. In 2005, he formed Vibrant Corp., a high-tech startup that uses proprietary technology to do non-destructive testing on aerospace components.

Vibrant spent a year incubating under MSI's roof, and this year spun off on its own.

"I'm still the largest single shareholder in MSI, but the management team purchased control of the company in March," Hunter says. "I'm dedicated full time now to Vibrant."

In June, Vibrant achieved its first success, winning a \$10,000 contract to help Boeing Co. evaluate a new method of manufacturing aerospace components. Vibrant will test the components to see if the new process is making strong, uniform parts.

"It's just a small contract, but it gets us in the front door," Hunter told NMBW after signing on with Boeing. "Boeing is one of the nation's two largest airframe manufacturers. If we demonstrate our capabilities there, it could lead to bigger contracts."

Meanwhile, as an emerging serial entrepreneur, Hunter offers advice to other startups as a member of the New Mexico Angels board of directors.

In his spare time, he takes to the skies in a Cessna 340 that he owns and keeps at Double Eagle Airport. And when he's not flying, he spends his time with his wife and three children.

At 45, Hunter says his proudest achievement so far was building a well-respected engineering company that stands on its own.

"My biggest success and pride in business has been to transition MSI from its roots as a one-man show into a company with a team of people that together can take it to much greater heights than I ever could alone," he says. "MSI has become a free-standing company, and I'm proud to say that I played a fundamental role in making that happen."

*[krobinson-avila@bizjournals.com](mailto:krobinson-avila@bizjournals.com) | 348-8302*

