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keystone, the central wedge-shaped stone in an arch, holds the other stones in place. Pennsylvania's nickname "Keystone State" can be traced back to a toast made at Thomas Jefferson's victory rally in 1802 in which Pennsylvania was toasted as "the keystone in the federal union."

With a name that combines both the proud heritage of their state and a commitment to excellence and customer service, Keystone Precision Instruments has grown to become one of the most successful survey and construction equipment sales and service companies in the Northeast. So what are their secrets to their success?

We recently had the pleasure of visiting their company headquarters in Whitehall, Pennsylvania. The friendly, experienced and well-seasoned team we met with included owner Keith Border, vice president of sales George Allport, Jr., and vice president of operations Pete Schaber.

Of course, success didn't just happen overnight. Keith Border's involvement with the industry began in Florida in 1982 following his service in the



## A Visit to Keystone Precision

>> By Marc S. Cheves, LS

U.S. Navy. With money from his GI Bill, Border obtained a degree in civil engineering. Because jobs for civil engineers were tight, Border took a job in instrument sales and this is where it all started.

In 1984 he moved back to his home in Pennsylvania and worked for 10 more years in sales and support. In 1994 he started Keystone Precision Instruments. The company started out selling Trimble

and Topcon equipment, but switched to selling Trimble exclusively in 2001. The business has grown tremendously along with the growth and acquisitions that Trimble has made. Keystone was number one nationally for Trimble in geomatics and engineering sales in 2002, and number two in 2003 and 2004. The Northeast, says Border, is great for machine control and high-end technology. Keystone has one construction



**L-R Pete Schaber, Keith Border, and George Allport, Jr.**

company client that has more than 75 GPS-equipped bulldozers and 25 RTK rovers. Border said Keystone jumped on the opportunity to sell machine control. This decision was driven by one side of the company's core business philosophy to take advantage of every business opportunity that Trimble offers them. The other side of the philosophy involves a layered approach towards sales and support. The team approach is closely managed by Allport. Pete Schaber maximizes the company's buying power and marketing.

Keystone currently has 37 employees, including five licensed surveyors and a P.E. The company is a family-oriented business and employee loyalty is strong. Border is proud of the fact that over the years, only three or four people have left the company. There are seventeen outside salesmen. They're not hesitant to say they feel that they have some of the best talent in the surveying and construction sales arena.

As a surveyor myself, one of the things I enjoy most about our industry is the connections surveyors make over the years. I had previously met one of Keystone's robotic specialists, licensed surveyor Rob Farrar, when he was a Geodimeter salesman in Maryland. One of the GPS specialists, licensed surveyor Alan Dragoo is a personal friend whom I met years ago when he worked for the Washington Suburban Sanitary



**Brent Godshalk, GPS Service Representative**

Commission (WSSC) in Maryland. After a 28-year career at WSSC, Dragoo retired and became a tech support/salesman with Trimble, then came onboard with Keystone in 2004. He started using GPS back in the days when you would start processing vectors prior to leaving the office at the end of the day and let them run all night. It would

be an understatement to say that he's a technology proponent. Border laughed and said that if you asked Dragoo for the time he could tell you how to build a watch over the phone, or, he could come and show you. Dragoo recently re-roofed his house, and in the process, installed a stable antenna mount for the new Keystone VRS network. More about that later.

Border said the industry is moving toward an era of the super-dealer. They feel that it is a big advantage for a customer to be able to deal with a dealer that can offer survey and construction technologies. Even so, because technology presents a learning curve, technical support is critical, both for hardware and software. Keystone has developed a support staff that encompasses all aspects, but yet has overlap so no customer is dependent on just one person. Between them, the employees have hundreds of years of experience.

The Keystone team talked at length about the growth of machine control. Border believes that technology has created more work for surveyors in the office dealing with 3D data prep, and in the field dealing with control and job site calibrations. Construction companies see the value and benefit of having real surveyors involved in-house. The downside of this trend, however, is that these surveyors are only using a small percent of their actual survey expertise.

I was also interested to learn about the different perspectives from which surveying and construction companies view capital investments in positioning technology: whereas surveyors have traditionally looked at amortizing equipment purchases over many years, construction companies generally view everything on a job-by-job basis. Purchasing decisions are made



**Dan Zeigafuse, Robotic Total Station Service Representative**

by asking, “Can this investment pay for itself on this job?”

Corporate trust and cooperation is a two-way street. Yes, Keystone sells Trimble, but Trimble also has to sell Keystone. Says Border, “Trimble has to sell us so we can look the customer in the eye and tell them, ‘This is what

you need.” He spoke highly of Bryn Fosburgh, vice president of Trimble’s Engineering and Construction Group, and appreciates Fosburgh’s quiet intensity. Border says he believes Fosburgh when he says, “Trust me. We know where we are going.”

Keystone can perform more than 99 percent of all repairs in-house. I was impressed by the GPS signal transmitter located inside the repair facility. Border believes that less than 50 percent of traditional surveyors have adopted GPS. Many more have implemented robotics, and Border feels this is due to the fact that robotic instruments offer something surveyors can relate to: angles and distances. I laughed when he said, “It’s no longer a Tool Box, it’s a Tool Truck!”

In keeping with the explosion of RTK

networks across the country, Keystone is in the process of setting up a VRS network—KeyNetGPS. First, the network will extend outward from the Whitehall office towards Philadelphia. After that, it will expand into Northern Virginia and Maryland. (This is where the antenna on Alan Dragoo’s roof will come into play). After tying the Pennsylvania network and the Virginia-Maryland network together, the network will then be expanded northward.

Keystone’s customers include private, corporate, government, educational and other sectors of the market place. A state of the art product line, industry experience and knowledge, and dedicated customer support and service are vital factors in their formula for success.

In the words of another well-known businessman, James Cash Penney (better known as JC Penney), “*The keystone of successful business is cooperation. Friction retards progress.*” Keystone Precision has nearly outgrown its 8,000 square-foot facility in Pennsylvania, and will soon move to a larger space. It has a branch office in Maryland, and is in the process of opening another in Massachusetts. That’s progress, indeed. 



**Rob Farrar, LS, Product Specialist-Optical Instruments**