

Retail service company Pro-Motion Technology regains footing after the recession

February 5, 2012

By **Greta Guest** - Detroit Free Press Business Writer



Lynn Matson is CEO and president of Pro-Motion, a Wixom-based company that works in retail display technology to connect with consumers. Starting this year, orders are up again. / JESSICA J. TREVINO/Detroit Free Press

Pro-Motion [Technology](#) Group in Wixom zig-zagged through the recession, but the retail service company has regained its footing and is growing again.

Lynn Matson, president and CEO of Pro-Motion, said revenues are still down from 2008, when the company had \$40 million in sales. But with revenues of \$26 million last year, she said things are moving in the right direction and the company is hiring again.

"Digital displays are just exploding," she said. "Now there is nothing stopping us."

Matson has plans to grow revenues to \$100 million a year within the next five years. She has 55 employees, up 10% from 2010, in the Wixom headquarters tucked away on Beck Road.

Pro-Motion has more than 100 [clients](#) including Microsoft, TGI Friday's, Coca-Cola, Kohl's, Nintendo, Target, Toys 'R' Us, Barnes & Noble, Comcast and American Eagle Outfitters.

For American Eagle Outfitters, Pro-Motion handles all the audio and video in stores including designing the system, doing the onsite wiring and installation and then servicing the equipment.



Matson, a model-turned-entrepreneur, started out selling combo television-VCRs to the travel industry in the 1980s. Her company now handles interactive digital displays in Mercedes-Benz dealerships nationwide and in other retailers' locations.

She started a company called BTV, for business television video, in 1986. That transformed over the years -- and over numerous technological advances -- into Pro-Motion.

"Back then it was overhead projectors, slide projectors and eight-tracks," she said. "The world has evolved. I happened to be in the right place at that moment."

The company grew to \$27 million in annual revenue by 1999, Matson said. It started handling audio-visual installations and service for retailers in 1988.

Then in 2000, she was sought out by a retail fixture company to integrate technology with fixtures. That company bought a majority equity share in BTV that year. Two years later, the new management team fired Matson.

"I was devastated. I thought, 'You can't fire me.' They could," she said.

By the end of 2002, she was able to buy back her company after the new owners defaulted on a line of credit. The day after Christmas, she fired them and kept her workers.

She renamed it Pro-Motion in early 2003, had \$9 million in sales that year and grew it to \$40 million by 2008.

But the recession in 2009 froze growth plans for many retailers. And if they weren't opening new stores, they often didn't need Pro-Motion's services.

"When the crash hit, we dropped to \$20 million," she said. "The good news is this company has almost zero leverage and zero debt."

Then, remarkably, in 2010 the company rebounded to \$32 million in revenue and started hiring people with high hopes for new orders in 2011. When revenues fell short of projections, they had some layoffs.

But starting this year, orders are up again. Pro-Motion is looking for creative development and graphic design talent.

"Our clients aren't building anymore. They are re-imaging themselves and with that comes a whole new digital package," she said. "With Mercedes-Benz, we are doing one segment but the next phase to that should be digital at the car level."

Matson spends a lot of time traveling overseas to meet with manufacturers who make the interactive display devices for her clients. Pro-Motion is the North American distributor on the products it installs.



Pro-Motion has hundreds of competitors, she said. Many of them are in one piece of the business that Pro-Motion handles such as Samsung, which makes the handheld units. But Pro-Motion also designs them, adds the content and maintains them.

"The worst part is everybody says they are in digital signage," she said. "Imagine competing with your vendors."

One of the biggest challenges in technology is keeping up with changes and finding the right talent to deliver what clients want.

"Our company's motto is 'One throat to choke,' meaning clients don't have to go to an application specialist and someone else on the service end," Matson said. "We do it all."

To keep a network of installers available nationwide, Matson brainstormed various groups that might work in a part-time capacity and came up with firefighters.

"They work nine days a month. They are capable of climbing ladders. They understand urgency," she said. "They are a perfect entity."

She hired a retired fire chief to help her connect with firefighters who could help with the installations, and it's worked out well so far.

Dana DeMatteo, an estimator for Structure Tone, a New York-based company that acts as construction manager on Fidelity investor centers across the country, has worked with Pro-Motion for many years. Pro-Motion handles the audio-visual work in the centers.

"They are a great partner," DeMatteo said. "All I know is their service people are very well-trained. We are dealing with another vendor on something else and all we are having is trouble with their service people. We haven't had that problem with Pro-Motion. They know their business."

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More Details: Pro-Motion Technology Group - Headquarters: Wixom

President/CEO: Lynn Matson

What it does: Specializes in digital displays used by consumers in stores and car dealerships. It also handles digital audio and visual installations at stores.

2011 revenue: \$26 million

Employees: 55

Growth plan: To reach \$100 million in annual sales

Website: www.pro-motion.us