

Clinard Engineering competes with the big boys

> Find out how this 16-person transportation design firm expanded its service lines and kicked up marketing to become the smallest firm on *The Zweig Letter Hot Firm 2007 List*.

Who says the little guys can't compete with the big boys? **Clinard Engineering Associates, LLC** (Brentwood, TN), a 16-person transportation design firm offering roadway and bridge design, civil, site design, and environmental services, placed #187 on *The Zweig Letter Hot Firm 2007 List*, the smallest firm to make the list. "It was an exciting surprise," Managing Partner Tom Clinard says.

He shouldn't be so shocked: The firm's 2003 revenues of \$1,048,869 rose to \$2,663,633 in 2006, a 154% increase due, Clinard says, to the extension of the firm's service lines, the addition of key hires, and a commitment to a small-firm atmosphere and flexibility that bigger firms in the area just can't match.

A family business

Clinard was founded nine years ago as a transportation design firm. Founding Partner Phil Clinard had worked for the Tennessee Department of Transportation and retired in 1999 after 37 years. Phil's son, Tom, had been working for 800-person multi-disciplinary design firm **Gresham, Smith and Partners** (Nashville, TN).

Starting the business together "goes back to when I was 10 or 11 and my dad used to do a surveying business on the side," Clinard says. "I helped with the business, and we thought it would be neat, down the road, to have our own firm."

The firm now operates three divisions: transportation, environmental, and land planning, with a partner heading each of those categories.

Clinard attributed the firm's growth from 2003 to 2006 to several key factors:

■ **Strategic planning.** "We made a conscious effort to sit down and do a

strategic plan for the firm in 2003," Clinard says. The three partners—Clinard, Phil, and Sammie McCoy—"sat down, worked out a plan, and updated it when we needed to. That was probably the best thing we did."

■ **Adding service lines.** Clinard expanded from its original roadway and bridge design work to include civil, site design, and environmental services. This led to opening an office in Chattanooga, Tennessee. There is also a project office in Huntsville, Alabama, that the firm wants to expand.

■ **Recruiting key hires.** "One of the biggest hurdles for us was finding qualified folks to fill these positions as quickly as possible," Clinard says. The firm grew from seven people in 2003 to 16 now, including the addition of five people in one year.

Clinard considered using a headhunter, "but, primarily, what works best for us is past relationships with employees at other firms." Clinard offers competitive salaries, a 401(k) company match of up to 4% of an employee's salary, and a generous profit-sharing program.

Clinard brings in new hires by "tapping into the frustration that people may feel that they're just another number in an 800-person firm." His firm also offers flexible working hours and "a very laid-back office and atmosphere."

The firm also cultivates a family atmosphere with out-of-work bonding opportunities a couple of times a year, such as Tennessee Titans football games and Nashville Predators hockey games, to which families are often invited.

■ **Outsourcing administrative responsibilities.** Clinard himself had long been responsible for most of the firm's marketing and HR functions. However, "one thing that may have contributed to our growth is that I started outsourcing some of those duties I used to do, which freed me up to get out of the office to market the firm and develop business," Clinard says.

"It takes money to make money," he says. "We made an effort to set up a marketing

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budget. We had to keep reminding ourselves, 'It's going to pay off.'"

The payoff

In 2004, the Alabama Department of Transportation selected Clinard for an on-call design contract, which entails an indefinite work agreement for spur-of-the-moment engineering projects. The Tennessee DOT also selected Clinard for a couple of similar environmental services projects. "We also started to pick up a lot of smaller civil, site, and land planning projects in Tennessee that diversified us a bit," Clinard says.

Clinard's reputation is already spreading. "Being our size, it seems like a yearly occurrence that we get another firm from the outside wanting to come knocking on the door, asking about an acquisition. It's something we wouldn't say we're never going to do. We're definitely keeping our options open on that."—

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Clinard Engineering Associates, LLC

INFRASTRUCTURE • PLANNING • DESIGN

> **Headquarters:** Brentwood, TN

> **Firm type:** Transportation design firm

> **Size:** 16 employees

> **Revenue growth:** From 2003 to 2006, Clinard's revenue grew 154% from \$1,048,869 to \$2,663,633.

> **Staff growth:** Clinard's staff grew from 7 people in 2003 to 16 today.

> **Markets served:** Clinard is a transportation design firm offering roadway and bridge design, civil, site design, and environmental services.

> **Hot Firm 2007 ranking:** 187

> **Other Hot Firm appearances:** None

