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Business & Technology: Monday, August 23, 2004

Interface

Microscan's bailiwick: bar codes

What: Microscan

What it does: The Renton-based company designs and assembles bar-code readers that scan items from car parts and lottery tickets to urine samples.

Who: Dennis Kaill, 39, has been with **Microscan** for five years and worked his way up from vice president of marketing to company president.

Employees: 135

Humble beginnings: Founder Michael Mertel started **Microscan** in his basement in 1982. At the time, he worked at a company that used bar-code scanners for photo finishing.

Mertel developed a more compact and advanced scanner than the one his employer used. At first, Microscan's scanners read only clinical sample bar codes. By the time Mertel sold the company in 1995, it made readers for several markets, including textiles, document identification, photo-finishing, electronics and pulp and paper.

Shifting gears: In 2000, **Microscan** decided to reduce the number of industries it served from a dozen to four. "We didn't truly understand the needs of 12 different markets," Kaill said. "Instead of being pretty good in 12 markets, we want to be the best in four."

The response: Employees were skeptical and some customers were angry at first, but Kaill and his team persisted. "You tell your employees, 'We're going to sell to less customers than we used to' and they look at you like you're nuts," Kaill said. "It took about 18 months before we knew we're better off than before."

The results: The company now sells about 30,000 to 50,000 scanners each year in automotive factory automation, electronics, clinical samples and



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Dennis Kaill is president of **Microscan**, a Renton company that designs and assembles bar-code readers. The company was founded in 1982.

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document handling. Other manufacturers use **Microscan** scanners to make a variety of products, including self-checkout machines found at grocery stores. Microscan's growth has been at about 20 percent per year for the past three years, Kaill said.

Price tag: A scanner runs about \$1,000. Service and support are extra.

Money matters: Mertel sold **Microscan** to Spectris, a British company that has 16 divisions and trades on the London Stock Exchange. Kaill said recent revenues were above \$30 million a year.

What's next: The company has offices in about eight other countries and aims for untapped markets worldwide. Kaill estimates **Microscan** consumes about 10 to 15 percent of the bar-code scanner market worldwide and reaches about 20 percent of the market, meaning there are scores of potential clients to pursue.

— **Blanca Torres**

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