

Cobra CIS continues to grow

From mom-and-pop to large independent in 11 years, Cobra expands into Winnipeg

Already one of Canada's largest independent security integrators, with 6,000 customers between Vancouver and Montreal, [Cobra Integrated Systems](#) recently became even bigger, when it added a five-man office in Winnipeg. That brings to eight the number of Cobra offices across the country: three in British Columbia's Lower Mainland (including the head office in Burnaby), and one in Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal, as well as the Manitoba capital.

"Find your niche. In this business, you can't afford to be all things to all people."

Scott Knutsen, Cobra's co-CEO and director of sales and engineering, says the company established a Winnipeg office in order to lay the groundwork for the future, even though it has no Manitoba customers yet.

"We're looking at a number of good projects in Winnipeg, including the future IKEA store," Knutsen says. "Cobra has undertaken security installations at several IKEA stores in Canada. Right now, we're working on its new store in Ottawa."

Cobra's Winnipeg branch is likely to be followed by others in the near future.

"We're looking at expanding into Saskatchewan and Vancouver Island, as well as some of the markets we're currently in," says Knutsen.

Cobra Integrated Systems is one of four operating companies of the CIS Group of Companies. The parent company's niche is three-fold: electronic and physical security, life safety and communication solutions.

The CIS Group began life in the Vancouver suburb of Richmond in 1992 as a small company called Cobra Security and Fire. In 2000, after only limited success, the owners sold Cobra to Scott Knutsen and Brian Sylvester. While they were working in the Vancouver office of Chubb Security, Knutsen and Sylvester (now co-CEO and director of operations) saw an opportunity to fill a need that large national companies had failed to satisfy.

"Our vision was to create a company whose focus was state-of-the-art medium to large commercial integrated security solutions," says Knutsen.

In the beginning, the CIS Group's target market was commercial developers whose head offices were located in the Lower Mainland.

"We expanded by following our clients across Canada as they won contracts," says Knutsen.

Today, the CIS group focuses on commercial and multi-tenant applications, from design and system architecture to installation and maintenance of building security requirements, including access control, video surveillance, alarms, enterphones, telephone and data, monitoring, elevator cameras and locksmithing.

The projects the company undertakes range in size from \$100,000 to as high as \$1.5 million.

In the past three years, the CIS Group has grown considerably. Not only did it acquire several new companies in previously untapped markets, it also expanded its client base and started to manufacture some of its own products. Since its inception, the CIS Group has grown 1,500 per cent.

The headquarters of the CIS Group is a 10,000-sq.-ft. suite of offices in an industrial area of Burnaby. The original company, Cobra Integrated Systems, is the oldest and largest of the



Cobra's Scott Knutsen (left), co-CEO and director of sales and engineering, with Brian Sylvester, co-CEO and director of operations. Knutsen and Sylvester bought the company in 2000, and have since expanded its presence from a local Vancouver provider to a national force.

four operating companies. With a staff of 40, its business is electronic security. Cobra Lockmaster, formed in 2009 from two acquisitions, has 10 employees. It deals in physical security: locks, safes, astragals and custom hardware. Webb Solutions, acquired in 2006, has 10 employees. It installs and services elevator communications and life safety solutions for elevator companies. Webb Electronics, also with 10 employees, manufactures elevator communications and life safety solutions. It was acquired in 2008. Altogether, the CIS Group has 70 employees.

Webb Electronics makes the CIS Group's newest product, the WMP-MMM expansion module. It provides audio and video communication using the same single pair of wires by multiplexing Ethernet over an existing telephone line.

The module gives emergency response personnel access to both audio and live streaming HD video of elevator cab interiors within moments of an entrapment call.

"Whether you're receiving an emergency call at a remote monitoring station or standing somewhere in the building, you can now see and speak to a passenger in the elevator through a PC or hand-held device over broadband Internet," says Knutsen.

Retrofitting elevator cabs with

audio and 1080 pixel HD video by WMP-MMM costs only 20 per cent of the amount to use elevator travel cable, Knutsen says.

Knutsen has a few tips for Canadian security integrators who have ambitions to grow.

"First of all, find your niche," he says. "In this business, you can't afford to be all things to all people."

Knutsen advises owners to lead a modest life and to re-invest in their companies so they will grow.

"Business is cyclical, so plan ahead — for a recession, for example," he says. "And go into new markets when they're cold, so you'll be ready when they're hot."

Finally, Knutsen says, take advantage of the latest technology.

"The industry has become more IT-driven," he says. "Cobra invests a lot of money in technology to help service our clients."

All Cobra managers, foremen and salespeople have iPads, and all technicians, salespeople and managers have iPhones.

"We realize they're not just toys for kids," Knutsen says. "They enable us to provide great service to our customers and do it cost effectively." **SPT**

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Cobra Integrated Systems At a glance

How long in business: Since 2000

Area of operation: Canada, between British Columbia and Quebec

Number of employees: 70

Areas served : Commercial, multi-tenant