

# 'Where Business and the Environment Converge'

## ECS Partners with Its Clients to Create Workable Solutions

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

Mark Hellstein started Environmental Compliance Services in his parents' basement, armed with little more than a shovel, a pickup truck, and a solid understanding of new regulations regarding what companies could and couldn't put into the air, ground, and water. What he's learned through 25 years in business is that knowledge of the regs isn't nearly enough to succeed in this highly competitive sector; one must also know how to partner with clients to find practical, economical solutions.

**M**ark Hellstein remembers back to the mid-'80s, when he was reading cover stories in *Inc.* magazine and other publications about how environmental compliance was going to be among the hottest sec-



*Founder and co-owner Mark Hellstein*

tors for entrepreneurs looking for opportunities.

He was intrigued, of course, because he was already in that business — sort of.

"I was two steps ahead of the game," he recalled with a laugh, adding quickly that while he did, indeed, predict some business opportunities arising from a slew of environmental protection measures passed in the late '70s, his entry into the field was more chance, or serendipity, to use his

word, than it was entrepreneurial instinct or brilliance.

He was part of a team at Hamilton Standard, working on a project, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency to develop new industrial pretreatment standards, when the funding was discontinued by the recently installed Reagan administration. He left Hamilton Standard in the summer of 1981 to "do my own thing," as he put it, which turned out to be several

years of hard struggle while trying to get a venture called Environmental Compliance Services Inc., then doing business out of his parents' basement, off the ground.

"I starved for two years ... I did landscaping and coaching ... basically anything I could to get by," he said of those very early years spent trying to take the work he did helping to write regulations governing everything put into the air, ground, and water, and make it into a business. He said he learned (the hard way) that while society in general, and the business community in particular, were paying more attention to the environment, if there was no enforcement of new regulations — a phenomenon stemming from Reagan-administration fiscal belt-tightening — then there were no profits.

Eventually, though, there was enforcement on both the federal and state levels, and ECS, currently celebrating its 25th year in business, started to take off. Helped by a solid foundation of work with several local businesses trying to do the right thing — Smith & Wesson, Spalding, Dow Jones, Savage Arms, and others were on that list — the company achieved solid growth through diversity and a reputation as a problem-solver.

It also evolved, said Hellstein, from a company focused primarily on the scientific and technical aspects of this sector to one that understands business and effectively partners with business owners and managers to develop and implement solutions. This "working together" philosophy

can be seen in the company's marketing slogan — *Where Business and the Environment Converge*.

It's catchy, said Paul Tangredi, ECS's director of Business Development, but more importantly, it speaks sincerely about not just what the company does, but *how* it does it.

Elaborating, he said that the company wants to be known not only as a provider of a wide array of services, but as a purveyor of something every business owner wants and needs — peace of mind.

"We want to focus on those things that keep our clients up at night," he explained, "and then, working in partnership with them, devise strategies to help those individuals sleep better."

In this issue, *BusinessWest* looks at how Agawam-based ECS, which now handles everything from underground storage tank monitoring to what is called 'industrial hygiene' to helping companies 'go green,' is setting itself apart in a sector now bulging with opportunists who must have read those same issues of *Inc*.

## Back Ground Material

Recalling how he wound up in the environmental compliance business, Hellstein said he considered it a logical step to take the work he did to help write new regulations — first on behalf of the EPA and then as a type of consultant with the state and the agency known then as the Department of Environmental Quality Engineering (now the Department of Environmental Protection) — and forge a business that would assist companies with meeting those regulations.

But over the years he came to learn that knowing the regs wasn't enough to really succeed in this industry; he also had to know business, and become a partner with business owners as they tried to balance environmental compliance and trouble avoidance with everything else on their plate.

And this was quite a learning

experience.

"Most people want to do the right thing, they really do," he said of businesses faced with environmental compliance issues. "But it's really difficult for a five-man plating shop that's barely making payroll to make this a top priority. If you have some expendable income, does it go to making the production line more efficient, or does it go to a water-treatment component that's going to make for a cleaner effluent going out of your plating line?"

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"It's difficult to be a middle-sized industrial player and try to make ends meet when you have OSHA requirements, workers' comp requirements, insurance requirements, payroll, and everything else," he continued. "Often, the last things that come on the radar screen, especially when you're struggling to be competitive, are environmental issues."

As he came to understand these sentiments, Hellstein said he worked hard to try to help business owners find ways to put the environment on their radar screen and to find cost-effective ways to manage their issues.

"In this business, you not only have to stop on top of the regs, but you have to stay on top of the technical disciplines that support the regs," he explained. "And you have to be able to take what is a black-and-white regulation and come up with a gray interpretation that's black-and-white defensible."

"That's where you can take the sciences and apply them to the regulations," he continued, "but more importantly, you can take science and the regulations and come up with a solution that's practical and economical

— and that's fun."

Suffice it to say, then, that Hellstein has had a lot of fun over the past 25 years. But he's also had some growing pains as he has taken the company from very humble beginnings — he had to tap into his parents' phone line to create a separate extension for ECS and used the family garage as a warehouse — to status as one of the leaders in this still-growing sector.

Looking back on a quarter-century in business, Hellstein said

that, while staying abreast of changing regulations and gaining an understanding of and compassion for business owners grappling with environmental issues, he also had to develop his own management and entrepreneurial skills.

He said ECS has changed over the years from a company concentrating on the purely technical side of the equation to one much more process-driven to one that is now "people-focused." There are currently 200 of them within the company, working at 10 different sites located in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, Ohio, North Carolina, and Florida.

Flashing back to 1982, Hellstein said that while he couldn't have foreseen how ECS would grow, he did sense that he was in the right place (meaning business sector) at the right time, and with the right set of skills.

By the end of the '70s, the EPA had effectively dictated that whatever went out the door and into the air, ground, and water would be regulated, said Hellstein, adding that these regulations would have implications for businesses large and small

and across a wide range of sectors.

In the early years, compliance was the primary focus for ECS and other ventures getting into this sector, and there was work with a wide range of clients, from the corner gas station to major corporations like Smith & Wesson.

The roster of services has grown over the years, and now includes brownfields and site redevelopment, drilling, emergency response management, landfill design, monitoring, and permitting, due diligence with real estate transactions, storage tank management, water and waste water management, and water supply development.

In recent years, new service areas have emerged, including health and safety training, IT services, geographic information services (GIS), advice on 'green' initiatives, and especially air quality and 'industrial hygiene.'

"Indoor air is becoming more of an issue for many businesses and institutions, because it's a quality-of-life matter," said Hellstein, noting that the company now has perhaps two dozen employees devoting all or most of their time to air quality, mold, and other potential problems. "And it's a completely different animal for clients; you can see soil, and you can see groundwater — how do get your arms around air and air quality?"

## Clearing the Air

Today, while doing all that, the company, and Hellstein as its leader, are focused on identifying what the next frontiers will be in this sector. Increasingly, he believes they will fall into the categories of sustainability, energy conservation, and what Hellstein calls "fundamentally sound management."

By this, he means that attention to environmental issues becomes part of a company's culture, and not something to be dealt with in a reactive manner, usually when there's trouble.

"In 1985, I would sit in front

of a client and say, 'you have this ground water problem; let's go in and clean it up'; the ground water is the perceived source of the problem," he explained. "Upon further review, though, you learn that it's not the groundwater that's the source, it's the soil — and it's not really the soil, it's the underground storage tank.

"And it took me a long time to understand that the tank wasn't even the source of the problem — the source is a management focus," he continued. "It's one thing to practice environmental compliance on a day-in, day-out basis, but it's quite another thing to integrate that into a management culture and philosophy — that's a difficult path to go down because it requires a great deal of trust between the client and the consultant."

That trust has to be earned, said Tangredi, through dependable service, usually over a long period of time, as well as through the development of creative solutions for clients. As an example, he pointed to something called eclipse Fuel System Management, a comprehensive portfolio of products rolled out by the company earlier this year to help convenience store chains and other businesses effectively manage their underground storage tank (or UST) operations.

Developed in response to new

state legislation regarding USTs, eclipse is a systematic approach to managing all permitting and compliance issues, system maintenance, and fuel management. Demonstrating the product, Tangredi using a laptop, clicked to a local client's data. Using remote monitoring, ECS can track the compliance history, maintenance and inspection history, and inventories, while also scheduling inspections and pro-

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viding 24x365 alarm response for dozens, if not hundreds of sites.

"Our focus has been on how we get on the front end of problems for the client," said Tangredi. "Because it's a lot easier for them to manage through their normal processes if they have built in some environmental considerations rather than having them call us at the end of the day and say, 'we have a problem here.' And it's cheaper for them to do it that way in the long run."

Saying this and getting clients to buy into that philosophy are

two different things. "It's not always an easy sell, and usually, it has to be *their* idea," he said, adding that, overall, the company is working on ways to bring value to the client in ways that go well beyond cost avoidance.

"We want to focus on better management practices that will save them money from an operational point of view," he said. "We want to help them be more efficient, or maybe be more

'green' — there are many things we can do to add to that value proposition."

The eclipse system is still being tweaked, and at present accounts for a tiny fraction of the company's roughly \$30 million in annual revenues, said Hellstein, but it serves as an effective example of how ECS is continually working to partner with clients to save them time, money, and aggravation, while also letting them sleep at night.

These are the main benefits that come when the environment,

and environmental compliance, become part of a company's culture.

### Coming Clean

When asked about another emerging business opportunity — helping companies go green — Hellstein said ECS is essentially just breaking the ice in that realm.

He told *BusinessWest* that many businesses are intrigued by the concept and want to do what is considered the proverbial 'right thing.' But they need to understand that there are often significant costs involved and that to do this process right is a top-down step that is more difficult than most believe.

"Besides, we have to start doing it ourselves first and practice what we're going to preach," he said, casting a sardonic look at the styrofoam coffee cup in front of him and noting that the company is still very much a paper-intensive enterprise.

ECS may not be as green as Hellstein would want it to be, but in most other respects it is providing solid proof that those writers at *Inc.* knew what they were talking about all those years ago.❖

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