

A stitch in time

Computer systems help large companies produce intricate monogram designs

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It was the airport that sold Jerome Kahn.

For his wife, Sky, it was the quaint downtown.

In search of a new home for the family and a thriving international business, the Kahns happened upon Hutchinson, the south-central Kansas town of 41,000, and deemed it perfect.

Kahn loves to tell the story of how he - a guy who wouldn't dream of being in the sewing business as a kid, a warm-weathered fellow from south Florida - became an embroidery software developer, providing technology

to Disney, Lands' End and Neiman Marcus, to name a few.

And how the 47-year-old, his wife and children Cord, 16, and Cambridge, 15, wound up in Hutchinson six months ago.

They basically ran into it.

The family was traveling town to town across the Midwest in search of new place to locate the global business and a new place to call home. Then they pulled into Hutchinson.

It was simple, he said. "I fell in love with the airport in Hutchinson. My wife fell in love with Main Street."

Kahn owns VeriStitch, a company that develops computer systems to help large companies like Disney and LL Bean produce large volumes of intricate monogram designs.

Initials on a Neiman Marcus handbag, personalized J.C. Penney bath towels, a child's name on a Disney shirt - it's Kahn who provides the software technology for those companies

to do those things, and to do them quickly and efficiently

His business is unique, the only one of its kind.

"We are the only company in the country, actually in the world that does what we do," he said. "For a small guy like me with a little company, this is a pretty big thing."

And since October, his business has been tucked away in a barn-style structure on Wheatland Drive.

"A Techie"

Kahn said he always has considered himself a computer geek.

On a desk at his office, he designs his ideas. Sometimes they work; sometimes he "makes a lot of smoke," he said with a grin.

It was through inventing that he started VeriStitch, which serves a niche market, one with a small

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customer base that purchases expensive, high-end equipment.

Kahn realized in the 1980s that the embroidery industry needed something that was cheaper and more efficient, quicker and helped the worker operate with fewer errors.

For instance, he said, a company could cut costs from \$5 to 5 cents by using his technology. A plant with 100 machines probably could produce 2,000 units an hour.

"Before, they weren't even doing half that production," Kahn said.

An alliance with Brother International, a leader in the industrial sewing market, has helped VeriStitch grow. The two are working together to promote their products to industrial and small businesses.

That includes promoting EZgram, Kahn's monogram software that allows users to choose from 400 monogram styles and graphics, work up a design on a computer, then forward it to the embroidery machine for stitching.

Many businesses that use the

software are small companies, with two or three machines, Kahn said.

It isn't available in retail stores yet, Kahn said, but hobbyists can purchase it on the Web.

At a trade show in western Massachusetts, Brother Regional Sales Manager Steve Hobbs was working on promoting Kahn's system and a Brother machine to a woman thinking of adding embroidery to her vinyl sign and engraving business.

"It's given us more options," Hobbs said of the alliance. "It should help us penetrate a market that has never been opened."

Disney

Maybe it's "Princess Hannah" embroidered on a fairytale princess nightgown, or another name put neatly on a Mickey Mouse sweater.

At a Disney plant in South Carolina, about 50 machines whirl out names on Disney apparel - serving customers who want personalized clothing with an image of the big mouse himself to Pluto - especially for the holidays, said Joe Kiley, senior manager for Disney Direct Marketing in South Carolina.

Today, those names are embroidered a lot easier, he said.

Machine operators used to type each name into the machine's computer, meaning reduced efficiency and possible operator error, including typos, Kiley said.

In August, Disney completed installation of Kahn's technology, allowing operators to just scan a bar code, which contains customers' order information, from thread color to the name.

"We've already recouped the cost of the system in a three-month period this year," Kiley said. "Machine operator productivity has increased by 20 to 25 percent, and we've reduced damages by a third."

Other customers are experiencing the same results, Kahn said. And most of the big companies, like Disney, are customers.

"There really isn't competition out there," Kiley said, adding he was pleased with VeriStitch. "We're continuing to see advantages."

It is the customers that make the job fun, their satisfaction, Kahn said. And he loves inventing on computers. He's been messing around with them since he was a child.

However, "If anyone said to me years ago I'd make my living with sewing machines, I'd probably have hit them," Kahn said.