

From black and white television to "glass cockpit" Thomas shows the way

IN AN industry where change is the only constant, a company's ability to embrace emerging technologies and respond quickly to new opportunities can mean the difference between failure and success.

One Australian electronics firm has given itself a new lease of life by diversifying within its specialised field of display technologies.

Thomas Electronics was known for years in Australia as "Thomas Tubes"; since 1975 the nation's only manufacturer of cathode ray tubes (CRTs) for television receivers.

Having recently relocated to larger purpose-built facilities at Milperra in south western Sydney, Thomas Electronics has expanded its focus to encompass end-to-end display solutions using not only CRT but also liquid crystal display (LCD) and plasma technologies, in addition to providing maintenance and repair services for the IT industry and depot level support for avionics display equipment.

New Direction, more expertise

ESTABLISHED in 1956 by US-based Thomas Electronics, Inc., Thomas Electronics of Australia became the subject of a management buy-out when the parent firm was placed in receivership in 1961.

The current managing director, William Hutchinson, is the grandson of the first Australian shareholder.

He said the move to diversify was brought on by economic necessity, but the company's success in broadening its expertise had received wide recognition.

"We've built a substantial business in providing repair and maintenance services for

computer monitors and other, more specialised displays, growing from one part-time technician back in 1987 to a team of 20 technicians here in Sydney with service agents in each state capital," he said.

"The company also generates significant revenue from our support of avionics display equipment for military and commercial aircraft, with support contracts for both Qantas and Ansett, the RAAF, RAN, Singapore Airforce and New Zealand Defence Force."

In addition to AS1822 Certification for its defence work held since 1987, Thomas Electronics now holds a Certificate of Approval from the local Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA), a demanding standard that takes up to two years to achieve and recently gained ISO9001 certification through SGS.

"We are also actively pursuing US Navy work on their F/A-18 display components, which we already handle for the RAAF."

"There are lots of other opportunities within the aviation field that we're also considering."

"We have the background, the expertise and a team of an extremely high calibre people in this field so the potential is significant, particularly as more organisations outsource their maintenance requirements."

"One area where we see ourselves moving is to support in-flight passenger hardware for the new generation commercial jets being used by a number of international airlines which feature small displays at each seat," he said.

The recent gaining of US FAA certification as an Approved Repair Station is a major step toward expanding this part of the business internationally.

Planning growth

THOMAS Electronics is also using its expertise in display technology in developing specialised avionics systems for organisations including the RAAF, Royal Australian Navy and British Aerospace.

"We're involved in several electronic projects for display system engineering, ranging from defence simulator displays to point-of-sale equipment and medical imaging."

"Three of our recent projects involved building simulator displays for use in training pilots on aircraft and also surface ships," he said.

"We've built display consoles for the FFG simulator at HMAS Watson naval base in Sydney, visual systems for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) PC-9 cockpit procedural trainer and a specialised display unit for the Seahawk helicopter simulator at HMAS Albatross on the NSW South Coast."

Hutchinson said he'd like to see the company grow significantly over the next few years and be recognised throughout the Pacific region as the leader in the field of display systems.

"We currently have annual revenues of \$3-4 million and are growing at around 25% per annum. The benefit of balancing both support and contract development work is that we maintain regular cash flow to finance the project work."

"Thomas Electronics is also committed to investing in ongoing R&D, which is critical in maintaining our expertise and staying ahead of the game."

Hutchinson said they've also had incredible support from organisations like the Australian international airlines, Ansett and Qantas, "which have been wonderful reference sites for us and promoted our



expertise internationally.

"We have also had great support from the major computer companies including Sun Microsystems, Dell, IBM and Compaq. "It's been very helpful for a small Australian firm like us to have big brothers like those companies with such credibility, to help us grow."

"We've needed to take a long-term perspective and apply a great deal of persistence to change the company from its previous narrow focus to where we are today, but we're now being recognised for our current capabilities and that's very satisfying," he said.

Thomas Electronics celebrated its 40th anniversary in 1996, which makes it a true survivor of the Australian electronics industry.

Given its position in the market and the opportunities ahead, it's also one that looks certain to last another 40 years.

