

Bend Up Close: Donnie Castleman

by K_Guice

On the Edge of Wireless Communications

Driving through Central Oregon many don't give using their cell phones a second thought. Chances are Donnie Castleman and his partners at Edge Wireless can be thanked for that clear connection.

Castleman, a Bend resident, along with Cal Cannon and Wayne Perry formed the wireless network in rural areas where some tease they wanted to fly fish and collect wine.

Donnie Castleman of Edge Wireless, shown with one of his two daughters, Whitney Perry He laughed at the thought and then admitted, "Usually when I vacation, I do end up in a large part of our foot print (coverage area), so that is what we like to do. We like our footprint," he said.

In 1999, the trio sat down with AT&T Wireless and talked about being their affiliate partner in what they called white space. "We talked to them about doing that for them in parts of Oregon and we came up with a big agreement."

The company generated business by using their customer base and building out. As President and COO of Edge Wireless, Castleman has been instrumental in the growth of the company and cell coverage in various rural areas.

He is responsible for overseeing all of Edge Wireless's customer affecting and technical operations, defining the vision for the company, corporate strategy and cultivating opportunities for Edge Wireless to continue to grow as a premiere wireless communications provider.

During his tenure, the company has become a top provider for rural communities throughout Idaho, Wyoming, Oregon and California.

Like Bend, many of the communities where Edge Wireless has set up shop have grown much like the company. "It's been fantastic," Castleman said. "For example, there is the wine business in Mendocino County," he said. "Lots of vineyards are being built and we are seeing a great influx."

Just because the wireless service in rural areas does not mean people are getting low-quality service. “We have always been a firm believer that people in rural America want the same thing that people in urban communities want,” Castleman said. “If I live in that rural area or travel into the area, I want the same level of service.”

However, the company doesn’t stop there. It works to be better than even the biggest wireless providers. “We would say the network is better than the larger carriers,” he said. “We almost always outperform the industry standards.”

In fact, Castleman says the rural customer can be harder to please. “We believe our customer has more stringent demands and has higher-quality expectations. We try to meet them,” he added.

“When they get complaints, unlike other providers, we actually dispatch a technician to go out there and check it out,” Castleman said. It is that willingness to go the extra mile that has made the company so

successful.

Edge Wireless officially launched their service in December 2000. They started with three partners, half dozen employees and 60 cell sites.

Today, the company has 350 employees, 350 cell sites and the company is working at adding another 70 over the next 12 to 24 months. In addition, the company started with zero retail locations and now has 18 store fronts.

At the heart of the companies success is its employees. In Bend alone, Edge Wireless has over 150 employees doing everything from customer service to running the engineering department.

“I think our employees really decide where Edge is going to go,” Castleman said. “To me the one

thing Iâ€™m most proud of, more than anything, is that weâ€™ve created a work environment where people like to come to work.â€™

Castleman says, often times he will come in at seven or eight in the morning and employees are at work early and often do not mind staying late at night. â€™You enjoy coming to work every day. I think a lot of employees feel that way,â€™ he added.

The company, ranked No. 36 in Central Oregon's 50 Largest Private Employers for 2006, has been recognized by Oregon Business Magazineâ€™s annual survey as being one of the best places to work.

â€™When Edge is gone thatâ€™s what I want people to remember,â€™ he said. That may happen sooner rather than later. Cingular, that now has agreements in place with Edge Wireless after taking over AT&T Wireless, has the right to make an offer on the company in 2008.

The trio could pay off the company's capital cost and enjoy the proceeds. "There is a one year window where we can go into those conversations, so we will probably do that," he said. However, walking away from the booming business would be a big challenge.

The company, that generates in excess of 100 million a year, is more than just a job to Castleman and his partners. In addition, he isn't anywhere close to being ready for retirement. "I think it would be hard," he said. "You have to have something to challenge the mental side of life."

However, he does like the idea of having a slower pace lifestyle that would allow him and his wife to travel, fly fish and ski more. It would also allow him to additional free time to spend with his two daughters and two grandchildren, who are now one and three years old.

Until a decision is made in 2008, Castleman says he and his partners will continue to grow their vision and create the very best wireless network the company and its employees can.

Bend Weekly Newslink: www.edgewireless.com

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