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Charlotte-based company aims to take the stress out of parking

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Bob Youakim's career followed an unlikely path: The MBA worked his way up to investment banking vice president at Wells Fargo Securities and then ditched a six-figure salary, of his own volition, to work in ... parking.

"You don't think of parking as being sexy," the Charlotte resident says, laughing.

And – let's be honest – it's not.

Nevertheless, the industry dominated by coin-operated meters and lots requiring cash jammed in numbered slots was ripe for innovation, he says.

Passport Parking simultaneously developed different cloud-based tools for mobile parking, event parking, permits, merchant validation and issuing tickets.

Now, after just three years, Charlotte-based Passport Parking has a staff of 10, a development team in India, an office in South End, a presence in 31 states, and high-profile customers including the cities of Asheville and Wilmington and California's Parks and Recreation Department.

And Youakim and his co-founder, his cousin Charlie Youakim, are at the helm of a local success story that, thanks to a gamble of an investment, is now paying big dividends.

Hunting for quarters

The idea for Passport Parking started with an observation: Why are most parking lots so antiquated?

"It's been a dinosaur," Youakim says. In a world where cash was becoming obsolete, parking often required change and dollar bills.

So Youakim started talking to his cousin Charlie Youakim, who helped design and develop the electronic systems used at many urban parking decks.

The problem, Charlie Youakim said, wasn't a lack of technology. It was the price.

Operators don't own the lots; they run them and on short-term contracts. So there's little incentive for them to invest thousands in installing top-of-the-line technology. And if they did invest in installing the technology, most of it required long-term contracts.

Another problem: The operators had a different vendor for every service they did offer: ticketing enforcement, event management, registering permit parkers, mobile parking.

And though mobile parking was great in theory – and there is no shortage of mobile parking systems – many required users to go through lengthy registration by phone.

The problems piqued the business gurus' interest. The Youakims began surveying parking lot owners,



operators and users. What were their problems? Frustrations? What would an ideal parking system offer?

And in 2010, the Youakims recruited a former Wells coworker, Khristian Gutierrez, and pooled their resources, about \$500,000, into development.

City and suburban clients opt in

The team didn't draw a salary for two years. It was tough. Bob Youakim's wife was pregnant with their third child. Gutierrez, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, was using his six-figure salary at Wells to support his family there. Without his monthly contribution, their home went into foreclosure.

But one by one, the Passport Parking team laid out what the competition was doing and found a way to do it differently. Charlie Youakim led development and hired and trained a team of three developers in India to speed the process.

With two teams on different continents, combined they had around-the-clock work.

Their competitive advantage was integration: offering a one-stop, cloud-based command center for cities, universities and private operators to oversee everything at once.

Rather than hire different vendors for each service, the Passport Parking software was able to monitor daily parking and show, via a geo-spacing map, which spots were taken at any given time. It could run data analyses to see which times of day were busiest. It could change the asking rate for events. It could see, in real time, when a car's time expired. Using the same data, paired with a small device, an operator could print a ticket.

Users can buy into just one of these services. But the more they use, the more discounted each is.

Say, for example, someone hires Passport Parking

for their mobile parking. “Then we say, ‘How are you managing events?’ ” Bob Youakim says. “They’ll say, ‘Oh we have someone standing out there, only taking cash, no credit cards.’ And we’ll say, ‘Oh we can flip the switch on that one, too.’ ”



And all of Passport’s offerings are based on a per-

transaction basis. Mobile parking is 25 cents per transaction. Ticketing is \$3 per paid ticket. Events are 10 percent of the total revenue, and permits are \$1 per permit per month.

In just one year, Passport has expanded from their first customer (a private operator in Wilmington) to a coast-to-coast operation, including the cities of Omaha, Neb. (4,000 parking meters), Asheville (1,000 meters) and Oak Park, Ill., a suburb of Chicago (4,300 meters). They launch in Detroit on Aug. 5, Bob Youakim says.

Not one of their 45-and-growing customers has opted out yet.

One California state park launched a pilot program with Passport in May.

Brian Ketterer, district superintendent for the state parks in Orange County, said Passport has been a great option for visitors who can now choose to pay at a machine or by phone.

Administratively, Passport’s system is great, Ketterer says. He used to spend two hours daily cataloging the previous day’s data.

“Day-to-day revenue used to be a chore to pull out,” he says. “Now, I can filter it immediately.”

Multifaceted business model

Gutierrez remembers when they attended a “Startup Riot,” conference in Atlanta in 2012. “One guy had a speech about how you have to focus (your business model), otherwise you’ll spread yourself too thin,” he says.

It’s a valid point, Gutierrez says. And for many companies, that’s vital, Bob Youakim says.

But for Passport Parking – like many startups – the key was doing it differently.

“And when you look at our products in isolation, it’s not like ‘Wow, no one else is doing that,’ ” he says. “But what is unique is that we’ve integrated them all.”