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Posted Sep 10, 2008

Technology

# Five Questions With: Albert W. Ondis

By Ted Nesi

PBN Staff Writer

Albert W. Ondis has been the CEO of Astro-Med, the specialty electronics manufacturer in West Warwick, since it launched two years after he founded the company's predecessor, Altan-Tol, in 1969. These days, Ondis could be called the elder statesman of the Rhode Island technology community – one of the only local tech entrepreneurs who can also tell stories about enlisting in the Army Air Corps during World War II or recall the days before the PC revolution. Ondis talked with Providence Business News recently about Astro-Med's success, how he stays current in a changing world, and what lies in store for the state's economy.

**PBN: Despite the weak world economy, Astro-Med recently reported another quarter of sales growth. What is driving sales at Astro-Med today?**



ALBERT ONDIS said he remains an active participant in his company nearly 40 years after he founded Astro-Med.

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**ONDIS:** We're certainly proud to report these results. What drives our sales is a three-pronged strategy of continuous product innovation, development of products that generate ongoing consumables sales after the initial hardware sales and ... expansion within foreign markets. Export sales are a hedge against regional economic downturns. Astro-Med is benefiting from worldwide interest in our products, especially our QuickLabel digital color label printers and our ruggedized cockpit printers, which are used in all the new airplanes made by both Airbus and Boeing.

**PBN: Are you concerned about the impact a downturn could have on Astro-Med?**

**ONDIS:** We feel that the economic downturn may slow our rate of growth, but at present we do not believe it will be damaging to Astro-Med. Of course, that could change as the full impact of the downturn has yet to be felt.

**PBN: What innovations are Astro-Med's engineers most engaged in working on right now?**

**ONDIS:** We employ nearly 40 engineers and most of them are working on new products which will be introduced later this year or next year. The secret of success with new product development is to improve product performance continuously and to broaden the scope of your product range in a deliberate fashion, as you gain experience and knowledge, rather than to gamble on a long shot that may promise great success, but is rarely the best road to true long-term success.

**PBN: You remain, by all accounts, an engaged and extremely active CEO in your 80s. How do you make sure you stay up to date on emerging trends and changing technology?**

**ONDIS:** I stay up to date the same way that anyone does. I learn as I go. It's impossible not to stay current with technology if you are an active participant in a growing technology-based company. I am, as always, a contributor to our product-development program, and I stay close to our markets by working closely with our engineers, visiting customers around the world and attending trade shows and conferences. I'm not doing anything different today than I did when [I founded the company in 1969](#).

**PBN: With your experience, you can also take the long view when it comes to**

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**the state's economic troubles. What's your take on the current situation?  
Where do you see things going?**

**ONDIS:** Rhode Island is still transitioning from an economic era dominated by manufacturers of jewelry machinery, textiles, and rubber even though many years have passed since those industries were in their heyday. We haven't fully adjusted to the new economy represented by knowledge-based companies.

The most significant thing Rhode Islanders can do to prepare our state for a renaissance is to prioritize math, science, and technical education so that Rhode Islanders can continue to create jobs and be hired to fill them. Not everyone needs to become an engineer or a technician, but no one should fail to be technology- literate.

By the way, one of the best ways to become literate about emerging technologies is to follow your natural curiosity and ask questions about how things work. Be a technology user. Be a technology reader.

*Astro-Med Inc. (Nasdaq: ALOT) is a maker of specialty printing, testing and measurement systems for industrial, scientific and medical applications. Additional information is available at [www.astro-medinc.com](http://www.astro-medinc.com).*

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