

Boston Business Journal

August 25-31, 2006 Vol. 26, No. 30

| ENTREPRENEUR |

The lay of the land

Harry R. Feldman Inc.

New generation helps modernize veteran land surveying firm

BY SEAN MCFADDEN
JOURNAL STAFF

In 60 years of business, the team at Boston-based professional land surveyor firm Harry R. Feldman Inc. has scrutinized sites as diverse as office buildings, court houses and colleges. But never a car.

So when the opportunity arose in June to perform a laser scan of the exterior dimensions of a hybrid vehicle that had been retrofitted by students at MIT for the International Vehicle Summit, the family-owned and operated business jumped at the opportunity.

"It was such a great twist, because we do survey work for many reasons — conservation of land or building a new site — but you never go out and survey a car," says Michael Feldman, 37, who took over as CEO in 2003 from his father, Jeff.

The MIT project was pro bono, and the time involved would have meant \$4,000 for a paying client. But Feldman doesn't worry: His third-generation firm does solid business by targeting a specific area, and it's beginning to see a return on capital investments its made over the past couple of years.

The company completes about 300 different projects per year — from property surveys and subdivisions for the state to land title surveys for commercial properties.

Despite the recent leadership transition, the business has remained resolutely focused on a single area of specialization, rather than branching out.

"What we strive to do is be the best shop in town for professional land surveying, and we don't want to divert any attention away from that by spreading into civil engineering or other disciplines," explains Feldman.

In fact, this 30-person outfit has seen incremental revenue growth since Feldman's ascension to the leadership role — growing from \$2.25



W. MARC BERNSAU / BUSINESS JOURNAL

Michael, Feldman right, CEO of Harry R. Feldman Inc., uses the company's new laser scanner on location with survey technicians Peter Sullivan and Chris Bouley.

million in 2003 to a projected \$3 million for 2006.

Jordan Krasnow, a partner at Goulston & Storrs in Boston, who has engaged the firm's services for about 35 years, says, "I've seen the generational change at the operational level and at the ownership level. Not a lot has changed, in terms of quality and responsiveness. The transition has been seamless."

Feldman says his chief concern coming into new his role was "to work on keeping our name out there" in an industry where competitors had

been doing far more marketing than his company had. And in a potentially risky move, he invested more than \$100,000 last year — financed through a five-year bank loan — on the purchase of a state-of-the-art Leica HDS-3000 Laser Scanner, which the company has since used on about 20 projects. Feldman says his is one of only four firms locally to use this scanner, which enables field data to be collected in less time and at a greater level of detail.

"It seems so counter-business, because I can't show you on paper that it's going to make us a ton of money," says Feldman. "But what I can almost guarantee you is that we think this is where a lot of surveying is moving."

Peter McHenry, senior management counselor at the Boston College Small Development Center in Chestnut Hill, says Feldman has brought "a balanced mix of energy, focus, imagination, smarts and good humor to the task of shaping both generational and technology change in the family business. He was respectful of the firm's achievements — and also ready to think outside the box."

SEAN MCFADDEN can be reached at smcfadden@bizjournals.com

FAST FACTS

Harry R. Feldman Inc. was established in 1946 by Harry Feldman. In 2003, Feldman's grandson, Michael Feldman, took over as CEO.

The company completed about 300 different projects last year, 90 percent of which were for clients in the private sector.

Project costs range from \$3,500 to \$40,000. Nearly all of the work is Massachusetts-based.