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## The Municipality Muse

Using its clients as a source of inspiration, **Vadim Software** has created products that help automate and simplify operations for municipalities in Canada and the United States

By Erin Brereton

Since its start more than 35 years ago, Vadim Software has made numerous enhancements to its municipal, financial, and utility-management products. However, the company has kept one thing the same: its first client, the District of Summerland in British Columbia, which Vadim signed in 1975.

The company, which was one of the first to offer integrated accounting solutions for local governments, places a strong focus on both client needs and creativity.

Vadim's dedication to customer service has, in fact, helped fuel its product innovation. In response to the needs of its local government clients, Vadim has developed software solutions that help municipalities budget, handle accounts-payable operations, allow citizens to view and pay utility bills, track business-license status, and more.

"We have, front and centre, focused on our clients' success," says Wendy Jarvis, Vadim's general manager. "We value long-term relationships, which is proven by our high customer retention rate."

Vadim has been successful in part to its concentrated client base.

Since opening its doors, the company has catered to the municipal sector. Yet crafting unique and innovative local-government software with multiple functions involves some specific challenges.

"A municipal payroll module has to be different than what a standard business would have, and they also need custom-revenue applications, such as taxes and ticketing," says Vadim's director of sales, Wayne Anderson. "It's an accounts-receivable module, expanded times 10."

Vadim's software integration is one of the company's biggest selling points. Customers can purchase a solution from one vendor that provides everything from core financial software to the ability to access property taxes online.

"Our software enables local citizens and employees to do things online, so they don't have to go stand in line at a counter to get a copy of their tax bill or pay a parking ticket," Jarvis says. These customers act as a key source of creative inspiration for Vadim.

In 2003, the company began distributing its software suite via a hosting environment—an idea that came from a client request—in addition to a server-based system. The hosting system makes it easier for remote customers to access the software and receive updates.

"A specific client had the need [for a hosting environment], but not the IT resources," Anderson says. "We accommodated them through a provider in their region and expanded the offering from that point on."

Vadim's product line isn't the only thing that's grown. Before expanding, in 2001, Vadim serviced roughly 70 customers primarily located in British Columbia. Today, the company's client base includes more than 260 customers in Canada and the United States.

"Anytime you're writing municipality software that works with laws and regulations in a region and you move to another region, that's a big deal," says COO Ron Begg. "It's completely different."

To help assess customer satisfaction, Vadim performs an annual independent third-party survey of its clients, who are also contacted throughout the year by Vadim account managers and executives.

Vadim also hosts four client conferences a year, which feature guest speakers and client presentations that highlight Vadim's software products' most innovative features—such as the customization capabilities of Vadim's popular property-tax and utility-billing solution.

As the market evolves, Vadim, which was purchased in 2001 by technology provider StarDyne Technologies Inc., plans to create and incorporate new functionalities into its software solutions to keep up with changing customer needs.

"We keep building the product out," Begg says. "Each technological revolution is a big deal to our clients."

The company also plans to enhance its mobile-technology applications, eventually allowing building inspectors to access GPS and other functionalities when working in the field.

Vadim would also like to add increased integration in its modules for citizen-engagement services so that residents can access business directories and event details—another idea sparked by client input.

"Like everybody else, municipalities are being asked to do more with smaller budgets," Jarvis says. "If we can provide software and services that give them efficiency or reduce the number of people coming in to ask about their tax bill, the tool can give municipal staff the time to do things that are more valuable to the organization."

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### 5 Questions with Ron Begg & Wendy Jarvis

#### 1. How do you innovate on a day-to-day basis?

WJ: We've got some really bright lights in our organization, both on the client-facing side and in the research-and-development environment. I love it when you can see the ideas click and grow.

#### 2. Where do you hope this innovation will lead you in the next 5 years?

RB: Technology just for the sake of technology isn't what Vadim does. Our products go a long way to make organizations much more efficient and reduce the effort required to get the job done.

#### 3. How has the notion of innovation changed in the past decade?

WJ: Our clients' expectations have accelerated. If you have a web page that's not updated every couple of days, people get bored. We have a desire as a society for things that are new and fresh.

#### 4. What defines an innovative company in the 21st century?

WJ: Recognizing that the status quo isn't good enough, even if it's really, really good right now. Tomorrow, what you're doing today is going to be outdated.

RB: You can't be complacent. You see the most opportunities with vendors who have become complacent either not taking the product forward or ignoring the market we focus on.

#### 5. How can a company encourage innovation without breaking the bank?

WJ: Get rid of the mind-set that innovation costs money. Some of the best ideas we've had have been inexpensive but have been perceived erroneously as roadblocks and really were not that big of a change.