

Returning to IT roots

Tech rental firm using its expertise to help clients shine on Zoom

BY **SHERYL NANCE-NASH**
Special to Newsday

Sometimes you have to go back to your roots to move forward. SmartSource began in 1984 as a Hauppauge-based computer rental company, Rent-A-PC, but it evolved into offering audio visual and technology rentals nationwide, with nearly 80% of that business focused on events.

CEO Ali Vafa remembers one Sunday night in March 2020. He was watching television with his family, and he kept getting texts and emails from one group after the other canceling events due to the coronavirus.

"We got hit significantly, quickly," Vafa said.

With live events fading fast, he and his team came up with a Plan B. The solution was a combination of the past, as they turned to their tradition of offering IT solutions and support (they provided thousands of laptops and cybersecurity support), and forging new territory, like virtual and, later, hybrid event production, as well as remote studio and meeting sets.

They go to a location the client chooses and set up a studio and work with them to create a professional production. SmartSource developed Presenter Kits, which consist of a camera, lighting, microphone, and laptop or tablet, so people can look and sound their best when meeting or presenting from home. Two



CEO Ali Vafa at SmartSource's warehouse in Hauppauge; the firm quickly shifted to a Plan B when live events dried up, but those events are now coming back and revenue is once again growing.

other innovations included kiosks that serve as automatic occupancy counters and thermal temperature scanners.

Vafa is proud of his team. "There is a lot of talent in every corner in my business. We executed quickly, beating the competition. Many companies that do what we do closed. Our shift saved us."

He shares how they did it. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

You went back to your roots, but what was the inspiration for the new ideas?

Clients canceled events, but we realized they still needed to communicate, to get information out there, so we came up with a way for them to do virtual events. We took notice of prominent people, scientists and local newscasters who were presenting from home, who were doing so in a less than flattering way. The back-

grounds weren't great, the lighting poor. This gave us the idea to offer remote studio or meeting sets. We have warehouse facilities around the country that we could use as broadcast suites. The Presenter Kits completed what was needed to polish a production.

Those innovations tie-in to your event expertise, but what about the kiosks?

We understood early on that

temperature taking and limits on occupancy would be important during the pandemic. We had high-tech screens that we used for conferences and our staff developed a way to use technology to count the number of people entering a facility and for taking temperatures.

What were some of the challenges you faced?

There were constraints on the supply chain. We needed more laptops for clients, there was a chip shortage, and our revenue was down. We had to ask investors for money to purchase them. We had layoffs. Pre-pandemic we had around 400 employees, and that dipped to about 100. We are back at around 250.

Through it all, what kept you going?

It felt good to help fight the effects of COVID. We supplied technology for temporary hospitals like the Javits Center and computers and peripherals to schools for students and teachers. We kept employee morale up with town halls, and one-on-one meetings with every employee. When there was a good month, we rewarded employees with restaurant gift cards so they could get food delivered.

How is business now?

September revenues were the highest SmartSource has had since February of 2020. The revenues from live events continued to grow. In fact, they were up 63% in September as compared to August, and live events were nearly half of our revenues for September. I'm inspired. This movie isn't over yet.

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KEY STAT

58%

Percentage of job seekers working in hospitality who say they plan to quit their jobs before the end of 2021.

Source: Jolbist survey of 25,000 U.S. job seekers

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RESOURCES

■ **Farmingdale Small Business Development Center** ([nwsdy.li/fsbdc](https://www.nwsdy.li/fsbdc)) serves Nassau and Suffolk counties, 934-420-2765, fax: 934-420-2895. Satellite office, Farmingdale State/E.O.C.: 269 Fulton Ave., Hempstead, 516-564-8672.

■ **Stony Brook Small Business Development Center** ([nwsdy.li/sbdc](https://www.nwsdy.li/sbdc)) at Stony Brook University, 631-632-9837, fax: 631-632-7176. Offers COVID-19 recovery assistance, workshops and market research. Satellite office in Southampton, 631-632-9837.

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