



Bob and Nita Gross walk through a section of their company, MaxBotix, which is located south of Brainerd. Brainerd Dispatch/Steve Kohls

MaxBotix repurposes equestrian center

By [Renee Richardson](#) on Oct 28, 2014 at 10:40 a.m.

Since opening its doors, MaxBotix had an ambitious goal to double in sales annually.

The technology company, ensconced on expansive grounds of a former equestrian center south of Brainerd, didn't always make the doubling goal but when it didn't it was close. The company grew by 350 percent in the last three years alone.

"It takes a lot of work to double; you have to look at every situation and every portion of the company," said CEO Bob Gross.

When Gross was at the reins without a high-level team, he didn't want to do more than double the business each year.

"But now I feel we can do more than that if we set the goal higher," Gross said. "It's a matter of what you set your goal to and then you have to look at how you do that. ... It is creativity and it is brainstorming with a whole team of people to make that happen, but we do it."

Since he was a boy, Gross has been a problem-solver. His wife, Nita, says it's how he's hard-wired. He looks at a problem to see how it can be solved with technology.

"He's always been a problem-solver," she said. "I just go along for the ride. I'm just the sidekick."

Their company, MaxBotix, makes ultrasonic sensors. In a nutshell, the sensors measure distance between objects. The use for such information is far and wide for private companies, entrepreneurs, students, hobbyists and governments. MaxBotix has 89 distributors in 30 countries.

Using a MaxBotix sensor, a municipal trash collection system has smart trash cans telling the city when they are full and ready for pickup. The greater efficiency saved the city money in the long term as it reduced its fleet of trash trucks and staff by two-thirds.

The sensors are able to detect water levels in tanks, activate kiosks when a person approaches to save energy, report how much snow fell and detect obstacles (potentially a golfer) in order to stop an automated driverless golf cart.

MaxBotix is a high-volume manufacturer of low-cost sensors. In recent years, as companies looked to trim as much as possible, MaxBotix was successful creating a place for itself in the industry by attracting customers looking for less expensive options to reach higher efficiency while maintaining reliability.

"Our economies are a little bit delicate right now," Nita Gross said. "We want to offer technology that innovates for (customers). Research and development is one of our main goals."

MaxBotix sensors are used in parking garages in Europe, where space is at a premium, to show how many parking spots are open and where.

Nita Gross described the work as creating technology to automate systems and give other companies the opportunity to grow and expand themselves. Their other goals are to create jobs right here in the lakes area, and lots of them, instead of outsourcing to Asia.

"Better jobs for a better community is our community mission," Nita Gross said.

As a way to keep prices low, MaxBotix is a cash-run business, never having to cover the risk of no payment or a delayed payment. Customers pay 25 percent down with orders and pay the rest before the sensors are shipped. A cash-run business without accumulating debt also provides greater stability, they said, and allows them to grow naturally.

The company offers tech support and has both wholesale and retail operations.

Brainerd roots and 'R2D2'

Inventor Bob Gross grew up in Pine Center and graduated from Brainerd High School. In 1978, he and Bruce Lundaby, both 17, created their own automated R2D2 - the rounded robot of "Star Wars" fame. The teenagers raised money by renting their robot out by the hour at \$25 and then \$100. It wore out 20 car batteries while Gross went to college, but the funds it provided were much appreciated by young students. The replica R2D2 now sits in the reception area at the MaxBotix offices. In the late '70s it could be seen working the sidewalk, squeaks and whistles and all, in front of a downtown Brainerd movie theater.

Bob Gross' abilities were apparent early. At age 12, he built a working radio from scrap parts around the house. He worked for Raytheon Co. on unmanned aerial vehicles but went out on his own after the opportunity arose to work on a 3-D ultra-sonic sensing project.

"I knew I needed to go into business for myself," he said.

Ideas and concepts come easily. The business of running the business can be a bigger challenge. Bob Gross found meeting with a group of 40 CEOs in Brainerd monthly was a big help. Bob and Nita Gross also worked to create a system to give employees more insight into operations and eventually provide profit-sharing. Employees were more involved and engaged, they said. Improvements came in morale and productivity.

As part of their efforts to encourage the next generation of critical thinkers, they donate thousands of sensors to the FIRST Robotics Competition for high school students each year, volunteer to work with the high school team and have provided internships.

One-thousand employees

MaxBotix started in, yes, a garage. One of 400 square feet to be exact. As the business grew and added equipment that couldn't fit in the garage, it expanded to office space in Baxter. Demand continued to force moves of the production facility in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010. In May of 2013, the business moved onto an acreage just south of Brainerd.

A short distance past South Long Lake, a dream for a classic horse boarding facility created a 22,000-square-foot equine center complete with offices, full-service tack shop, box stalls and an indoor riding arena.

Four Winds Horse Center was up and running in 2008 and hosting dressage and hunter jumper schooling shows in 2009, but getting enough interest in the 50-

stall boarding facility proved to be challenging in the wake of the Great Recession.

When ownership reverted to the bank, Bob and Nita Gross saw an opportunity to repurpose the site for their technology company.

The 23 acres of land, including pastures bordered by thick pine tree groves along with substantial building space provided just what they wanted - room to grow. They are using about 10,000 square feet now. The heated indoor riding arena remains largely untouched as though a dressage class could start any minute. The highly sought after soft dirt that once filled the arena was donated to the Crow Wing County Fairgrounds.

Reminders of the original equestrian center dream are everywhere, from the the horse-topped weather vanes to the tidy and roomy white-fenced paddocks and three-sided lean-tos. Horseshoes embedded into the concrete floor of what once was the retail tack shop now square up in the MaxBotix reception area and lead to a door that once led to the barn. Now computer work stations, a 3-D printer, engineering, assembly and shipping areas fill the former stables. The tack room is now a team meeting space.

In the office Nita and Bob Gross share there is a saying: "We create our tomorrows by what we dream today." Their goal is to create 1,000 jobs right here. Currently, employees number 18 in the family operation.

"We know we'll make it," Nita Gross said. "One thousand employees is not a lofty goal. It is very doable."

At MaxBotix, the philosophy is to apply pressure to grow. And there is a lot of space for that at the former equestrian center. Nita Gross said, "We really liked the idea of being able to repurpose this beautiful property."

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