

## Telecom expense monitoring service takes root

By David Flaum

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Three years ago, Morgan Keegan & Co.'s monthly bill from BellSouth was a 3-inch thick stack of paper.

That made the bill and the brokerage firm's other telecommunications invoices nearly impossible to check for mistakes or analyze use, said John Threadgill, co-director of information technology.

Along came Asentinel, a Memphis company with a computer program to handle telecom expenses.

"Now it electronically brings bills in, goes through about 200 rules to flag abnormalities, compares it to inventory and previous bills, electronically approves what is correct and pays it," Threadgill said.

Asentinel started in 2003 under telecom veteran David Perdue.

"I learned a long time ago there were errors in those telephone bills," said Perdue, 63, chief executive officer and co-owner. For more than 35 years he has started and sold companies that marketed telephone and data systems, long distance services and cellular phones and pagers.

In 2001, executives at Cornerstone Technology, a Romanian firm, approached Perdue about forming a business to market their software -- computer programs to manage and analyze bills for phone, data and other telecommunications services.

A year earlier, Union Planters Corp. of Memphis, looking for help to automate bill paying, brought in Cornerstone programmers to develop the software, said Rick Dupont, network services manager for Regions Financial Corp., the Birmingham firm that bought UP last year and owns Morgan Keegan.

The program was put into place in late 2001. UP executives decided they didn't want to be in the software business, so they sold the program back to Cornerstone.

UP was spending \$37 million a year on telecom and saved \$500,000 in the first few months the system was in place, Perdue said.

His deal with Cornerstone jelled into Asentinel in 2002 and the company opened a year later.

Asentinel has 19 customers, including eight financial institutions. The company is an exhibitor at the Bank Technology Conference in Memphis that ends today.

Asentinel had revenues of \$1.3 million last year, Perdue said. That should reach \$3 million this year, when the company is expected to become profitable.

Without Asentinel -- and a number of other firms that have developed similar products -- most firms get consultants to audit their bills every five years or so, Perdue said.

"They look for the low-hanging fruit, the big-dollar stuff," he said. That gets the companies refunds, but problems that lead to errors don't get solved, Perdue said.

The smallest Asentinel package costs about \$175,000, but that is usually less than 2 percent of a customer's telecom bills, Perdue said.

Users say the packages have helped them cut costs.

In the first month, Morgan Keegan saved the price of a year's worth of service, Threadgill said.

Dupont said UP is no longer paying for services it didn't need, billing issues are resolved before charges are paid rather than several months later, and employees spend more time on analysis and less on data entry.

"The software works great," he said. "They're always adding enhancements and the service is excellent."

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### ASENTINEL

Top person: David Perdue, CEO  
 Address: 1715 Aaron Brenner Drive  
 Business: Licensing software to analyze, manage and pay telecommunications bills  
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Nikki Boertman/The Commercial Appeal

Richard S. Janis (left) and David Perdue of Asentinel discuss communications needs with Louis Rosenthal at the Bank Technology Conference at The Peabody.