

## OAKLAND BUSINESS &amp; Finance

## 2 Oakland firms among fastest-growing

BY LAURIE HUMPHREY

Staff Writer  
In a nation of big business, two local companies are bigger than most, according to a published list of America's 500 Fastest Growing Privately Held Companies by Inc., the monthly business magazine.

Inc. recently featured the successes of Zaske, Sarafa & Associates Inc. of Birmingham, a money management/investment counsel firm, and Virtual Services in Rochester Hills, a high technology computer service and support firm.

A newcomer to the 500 list, Zaske, Sarafa & Associates, Inc. ranked 160th with a growth sales rate of 1,256 percent from 1990-94. The company's 1990 gross sales of \$422,000 skyrocketed to \$5,722,000 in 1994. The reason, according to co-founder/Chairman/Chief Financial Officer, Arthur E. Zaske — commitment to customer service.

"I attribute our success to doing all that we can to meet all of our company's needs," he said, emphasizing commitment to communication and risk tolerance. "It's more to do with communications and intellect (going over all the options and risks involved with the clients) than it is a time commitment (working overtime)."

As proof of the company's commitment to customer service, all 22 employees are enrolled in ongoing training sessions and educational seminars focusing on the customer in the money market. Employees are educated how to better serve the clients. Clients are also invited to attend similar seminars.

"Communications in our firm is moving away from communicating just the performance of stocks. We are working to communicate what the businesses in our client's portfolio are doing," said Annmar K. Sarafa, president and CEO.

He explained the reasoning behind all the communications and training. "We would like Zaske and Sarafa & Associates, Inc. to be known as the knowledgeable investor's choice."

To that end, the employees are



JOE RIDER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Air of authority: Partners Michael Dolik, left, and Alex Violassi of Virtual Technology are an authority in computer services, says Inc. magazine, which ranked the company in the nation's list of top 500 privately held companies. Not pictured is a third partner, Mark Ratliff.

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going the extra mile. Sarafa said the company is expanding communications because customers are starting to demand it. "The desire on the part of the customer drives us to be even more customer-oriented," said Zaske.

Zaske, Sarafa & Associates, Inc. serves primarily institutions and high net worth individuals — "individuals who have half a million dollars in liquid investible assets," said Zaske.

The company currently has 350 million under management for a number of clients, many of which reside outside the state. And while they do not currently have international clients, Zaske said he was not opposed to entering that market.

Being named to Inc.'s list is not the first time Zaske, Sarafa & Associates has been honored for their accomplishments. In fact,

the most recent accolade is connected to an earlier recognition as one of the top 100 Michigan companies. A study conducted by a Detroit-based public and financial relations firm, in conjunction with Pzeny & Co., ranked the business third in the Michigan Private 100.

"We figured if we were third in the state, we'd have to be at least in the top 250 in the country," said Sarafa. As it turned out, they did even better: "I never thought we'd be that high," he said.

Goals for the future include more comprehensive services, to allow clients to turn solely to Zaske, Sarafa & Associates for their financial planning needs, continued communications improvements, and an even closer working relationship between the company's employees.

Sarafa, when faced with all the

company's accomplishments, is most interested and proud of his employees' growth and dedication.

"I'm not most proud about our (company's) growth, because that is just a consequence of doing the right things for our clients. It's recognizing that we had to re-tool because our growth was getting ahead of our capabilities. Now that we have done that, we are a much stronger organization."

All 22 employees went through the fire, and now we are forged closer together," he said. "We are a very talented team."

Also honored, but not new to the list, is Virtual Services, which ranked 247. This year marks the second time the Virtual Group affiliate has been honored as one of America's Fastest Growing Privately Held Companies. Virtual Group as a whole also has been honored in this event in 1993.

With an increase in sales volume of more than \$10 million from 1990 to 1994, Virtual Services peaked at \$21,399,000 last year. Officials are projecting even higher numbers for 1995.

"I attribute our success to risk-taking, good employees and a growth-oriented strategy," said



STEPHEN CANTRELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Suited for success: Annmar Sarafa, left, and Art Zaske, leaders of Zaske Sarafa & Associates, integrate personal service in delivering financial advice at their offices in downtown Birmingham. They ranked in the top half of Inc. magazine's top 500 privately held companies.

President Alex J. Violassi, who cites Ford Motor Co., Chrysler Corp. and General Motors Corp. as some of their biggest clients.

In response to the honor, Violassi said: "Once again, we are extremely pleased to be recognized as one of the nation's fastest-growing, privately held businesses. The Michigan market has provided us with distinct challenges and opportunities. The automotive sector has created a full spectrum of CAD/CAM/CAE/PDM technology to which Virtual Services has responded aggressively."

Violassi's long-term goal: "To be a \$100-million automotive supplier with CAD/CAM integration."

The two companies honored in this listing submitted their numbers to Inc. magazine. But not everyone qualified for the honor, said a representative of the publication.

According to Inc.'s Brad Selph: To qualify, a company must have been independent and privately held throughout 1994; must have had at least \$200,000 in base-year sales; and must have shown a sales increase from 1993 to 1994.

## Cyberspace Yule cards ring in holiday season



EMORY DANIELS

There is a seasonal activity at my house, though, that is occurring right now and probably warrants some attention this week. We are eating at various spots throughout the house because the kitchen table is rapidly being filled by Christmas Card boxes, envelopes, address lists, stamps, return address labels, and other card sending stuff. My wife is at it

again. I did promise not to write about Christmas sites on the World Wide Web until after Thanksgiving. And I will try my best to keep that promise, even though my mailbox and literature rack is filling up with Christmas sites on the Internet.

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We could be eating meals every night at my kitchen table if my wife would only agree to snuff the mail-mail tradition and send all our Christmas greetings through cyberspace. But, alas, all our friends don't have E-mail addresses yet. And, alas, my wife is not yet a cybernaut.

If she were, though, our table would be far less cluttered if we sent CyberSpace Christmas Cards out this year. Not only less clutter but no postage stamps neither. And you can mail later because delivery time is much faster.

The opportunity to send out holiday cybercards via E-mail and a Website is being offered on the Internet by Domino's Farms and the Branch Mail in Ann Arbor.

For several years now, Domino's Farms has offered its Christmas

Light Display out at the pizza headquarters on Earhart Road east of US-23. It's really quite a spectacular site and a very nice family thing to do during the holiday season. My family has enjoyed both the Domino's display and in recent years the county display along Hines Drive.

Anyhow, this year through the magic of E-mail and the Internet, CyberSpace Christmas Cards containing scenes from this year's Christmas Light Display can be sent from anyone's home free of charge to family or friends everywhere in the universe.

To send a cybercard to a friend or relative, you need a Web browser. A graphical browser like Netscape, Mosaic or Cello works best because you can then view the half-dozen or so scenes before selecting. I visited this site once using a Lynx (text-only browser) and made a "blind-draw" by selecting a scene and not knowing what it was. But don't do that. Use a graphical browser as intended. You can send a card by going to <http://christmas.branch.com>.

Upon arriving, you are asked to fill out your name and E-mail address, and the name and E-mail address of the person who will receive the greetings. You then are asked to type in your personal greeting. Next you can select from different Christmas Light Display set images. Then choose "send" and your custom-made Christmas card goes sailing off into cyberspace and lands in the E-mail box of the intended recipient.

The intended recipient receives an E-mail message advising him or her that a card awaits them at Branch Mail. The recipient then goes to a graphical Web browser and goes to <http://christmas.branch.com> and ends up at the Christmas Light Display Website. You go to an area marked "cards waiting" or something like that, and the greeting card appears on the screen to be viewed, read, or printed out to keep.

"We realize that not everyone will be able to take advantage of this offer," says R. Scott Lorenz, director of Christmas Celebration, Inc., the organization which plans the display each year for Domino's. "But we want to offer some holiday fun this year for anyone actually anyone in the world who has a computer with access to the Internet."

"You can send a cybercard to anyone with a Web text browser but they wouldn't be able to view your favorite Christmas Light Display scene, only read your words. For the full impact the friend or relative you send a cybercard to will want to have a

graphical Web browser."

There is a Christmas site on the Web that might cause confusion to you if you type the wrong URL for the cybercard Website. If you type <http://christmas.com> you will end up at this other site by mistake. But I won't talk about this other site before Christmas so if you want to send a cybercard with your favorite Christmas Light Display then make sure you type <http://christmas.branch.com>. (Guess how I discovered the other site?)

You can direct questions to Emory Daniels by e-mail with [emory@oconline.com](mailto:emory@oconline.com) or fax number 591-7279. To sign up for O&E On-Line, dial (313)591-0903, at "log-in" prompt type "tree" and at "Key" prompt type GL6NY2. Past columns may be accessed online at <http://oconline.com/titled/marklemory/archiv.html>.

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## Rely on instincts; thank-you notes help; don't lie



GEORGE W. HAYES

No. Inner feelings should count heavily when signing up a new employee. Long-term success with any company depends on the simple execution of required tasks than on attitude-based dynamics such as creativity, productivity and how you are perceived by associates. It's only practical that you enjoy your work and feel in tune with your environment.

These had vibrations suggest that you're not ready to move or that there is a subtle mismatch.

Q The pre-writer company in my industry has just made me an outstanding offer — more money, more responsibility, more potential. However, something doesn't feel right and I might turn them down. Am I nuts?

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Q How important is it to send a thank you note after an interview?

A Thank-you notes fall into the category of little things that can occasionally help you and never hurt you. Sure, they're a little transparent in purpose,

but most employers like getting them. If a company has made a definite decision not to hire you, a thank-you note probably won't make a difference. On the other hand, if you're considered a finalist, it could tip the scales your way. A well-worded letter could also keep your hat in the ring for future openings.

Keep all follow-up correspondence brief, but tailor-made to the manager you are addressing. Mention something that you have in common or your ability to meet a specific need. Never let a letter sound like you're pleading for a job or your application will end up in the X files.

Q I had to fudge a few things on an application recently. Could this come back to haunt me?

A Oh, you mean you lied. Over the years, I've dealt with people who have fudged, embellished, glossed over and fabricated all kinds of things that are now proved to be false, including: length of employment (no, she

worked here six months, not six years), degrees (sorry, there's no record of that person), employers (never heard of him), reason for leaving (laid off nothing).

It's easy to check. If something goes wrong, such as an industrial accident or loss of business resulting from your actions, you could be held liable if you've overstated your credentials.

The truth is likely to bubble up when you least expect it and you will be embarrassed.

False information is typically grounds for immediate dismissal.

Even employers who decide to look the other way after discovering a discrepancy will view you with less respect.

I'm happy to report that intentional misstatements are a real rarity. Most people sell themselves by emphasizing their strengths and handling negative

subjects with clarity and brevity. Who needs the hassles that come with fudging?

Send questions to George Hayes, Job Search, P.O. Box 2497, Southfield, MI 48037. He is president of Emplex Corp., a recruiting outplacement and testing firm in Southfield, and vice president of Proxy Employment Services, also in Southfield.

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## Charities benefit from entertainment guide

For the 35th year, Troy-based Entertainment Publications has released Entertainment '96, a discount guide with 2-for-1 local and national offers on dining, movies, shopping, car washes, travel and other activities.

The \$40 guide is available from many Oakland County charities, social and community organizations. Volunteers from non-profit groups expect to raise \$750,000 from the sale of the entertainment

guide.

The guide's newest feature is Entertainment Gold, a dining discount program that automatically works with the swipe of a credit card. With the presentation of a VISA or MasterCard, members will automatically get a 25 percent discount on their bill at 25 local restaurants and hundreds of eateries nationwide. Consumers

See CHARITIES, 6AA