

Old-Fashioned Customer Service *meets*

By Charlene Hankinson

Corporate Research International (CRI) has been named to Inc. magazine's list of the 500 fastest-growing private companies in the United States for the past two years in a row, and the company's founder, Michael H. Mallett '88, is confident it easily will make the list for 2006 as well.

Currently an \$11 million company, CRI ranked 396 in 2004 with 346.1 percent sales growth and was listed as 481 for 2005 with 314.1 percent growth over a three-year period.

Many may be surprised to find such a dynamic company located in Findlay rather than a major metropolitan area. After starting and selling a company in Washington, D.C., Mallett and his wife, Anne (Harrington '89), both Findlay natives, decided that home was the best place to live and start a family. Findlay also proved to be the best place to start a business.

Returning in 1994, Mallett worked for a few years with Hancor Inc. before he purchased a local golf course on County Road 205 and named it Oak Mallett Golf Club. Bored during the down season, Mallett launched CRI, a mystery shopping and marketing research company, from the pro shop in 1998. He was the first to integrate mystery shopping with Web applications, which has enabled him provide services around the world with unprecedented speed and accessibility.

Among CRI's approximately 230 clients are major retailers and restaurants such as K-Mart, Lowe's, Sears, Chili's, Exxon and Foot Locker. In addition to 170 full-time employees, CRI has approximately 350,000 independent contractors worldwide in the United States, United Kingdom, Asia, South America and, soon, in the Middle East. They serve as undercover shoppers or "auditors," who report on customer service, product quality and the appearance of stores and eateries.

Auditors assigned to evaluate clients' business establishments file their reports through the Internet



Michael Mallett '88
CEO and Founder,
Corporate Research International

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(Speaking of his parents, UF faculty members, Dr. Jerry Mallett and Dr. Karen Eubanks)

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within a few hours of the visit. Digital cameras may be used to document the cleanliness of restrooms or the toppings on a pizza.

Auditors in international locations must be at least bilingual, with one of the languages being English. Serving as a mystery shopper has become a much sought-after job. Mallett reported that he receives 200 applications per day.

The company also specializes in interactive Web and voice response, in which a client's customers are enticed to participate in a online or telephone survey where they rate products and services in return for small rewards such as coupons or discounts.

In addition, Mallett utilizes his vast network of Internet-linked auditors to provide customer perception research and to conduct consumer behavior surveys to track trends on various topics such as health care and charitable giving. Surveys posted on the Web can receive 30,000 responses within a day, he said.

"Everything is centralized in Findlay. There are no remote offices," Mallett remarked. Headquartered at 130 E. Sandusky St., CRI is housed in an imposing, four-story brick building. Mallett chose to rehab the historic Kirk mill and grocery in the downtown district and renovated it with all the charm of a big-city loft.

According to Mallett, the business is extremely fast-moving. "The change management is absolutely huge," he said. "It's tough, juggling the balls every day, but that's part of the excitement of it."

Despite the fast pace of the business, the small-city location allows him a more leisurely lifestyle where he works a few blocks away from his South Main Street home and is a few minutes away from his children's activities. Alexandria "Ali," 12, and Van, 9, are both active in sports and good in school, their proud father reported.

Recently, the state of Ohio recruited Mallett as one of five business executives featured in national

ads to encourage businesses to locate in Ohio for the quality of life. The "Build Your Business. Love Your Life" campaign ads have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Fortune and others.

Along with his loyalty to his hometown, Mallett has a strong connection to The University of Findlay. His father, Dr. Jerry Mallett, professor of education and director of the Mazza Museum, started teaching at Findlay College the year Michael was born. "I grew up there," he said.

As a business major at Findlay College, Mallett appreciated the positive influence and mentorship of Dr. Frank Bowers, who was chair of the Division of Business Administration, and he noted that it was Dr. Ray McCandless, professor of political science, who inspired him to choose political science as a minor. "I had some great professors that I bonded with and learned an awful lot from them," Mallett said. "You get in that small class environment, and it's hard not to become friends with your professors."

On campus, Mallett was president and vice president of the Student Government Association, served on student committees and was a member of Theta Chi fraternity. For his academic achievements and campus involvement he was named Founders' Son his senior year.

Mallett credited his father and his mother, Dr. Karen Eubanks, who is an adjunct faculty member at UF, for his success. "Where I'm at now, I owe it all to them," he said. "They wanted me to go to The University of Findlay, and they were right about that. They've just been the main support, and I give them all the credit. They are awesome."