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WILL THIS BE SARASOTA'S **BILLION- DOLLAR COMPANY?**

Digital Leather's revolutionary
technology could change the
leather industry forever. p6

HOW A SARASOTA COMPANY WANTS TO DO THIS TO YOUR

LEATHER

And what it could mean for a local economy still dependent on real estate

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Imagine a yellow leather chair with the image of a bright sunflower bonded to the leather itself, or a black leather chair that looks as though it has just burst into flames.

Until now it was impossible to imprint those sorts of images on leather.

You could get upholstery, clothing, shoes and handbags dyed in different colors, but generally in a monochrome. Decals or sewed-on stitchings provided the only flourishes.

But because of a group of Sarasota entrepreneurs — the same people who founded LexJet, one of the most successful companies in Southwest Florida — the staid and conservative world of leather may change forever.

Within the next eight months, products using digital printing technology developed in Sarasota will hit the market, and the company's founders — Ron Simkins, Art Lambert and Bob Mabbott — have visions of generating billions in revenues.

"This will change the leather business in the same way that the personal computer replaced the typewriter," Simkins said. "There is no economic reason not to do this. There is no environmental reason, either. This is just the way it's going to be done."

That their new company, Digital Leather, is based in Sarasota is a fluke. It is only here because its founders live here.

But the company, if successful, could help diversify a region dependent on real estate and tourism for decades.

Exactly how fast Digital Leather will



grow is an open question. Some believe it will take time for consumers, designers and manufacturers to wrap their brains around the idea that leather can be made in colors and patterns.

"There is a point at which the neatness of the technology takes away from leather to the point where it doesn't even look like leather anymore," said Bill Perrone, the president of Perrone Aerospace, a leather upholsterer for the aviation industry. "I think it's a great idea and I'm trying to sell it like crazy, but it's something that traditional folks won't necessarily leap at.

"My customers are really conservative people," Perrone added. "They like cream, tan and shades of gray, and going wild means adding a walnut finish. They don't want to play with anything jazzy."

Rebecca Minkoff, a hip New York handbag designer, had a similar reaction: "My company would only do that printing for novelty items. Our customers want beautiful leather that looks like leather. I think this is a great idea, but I'm not sure how quickly designers will pick up on it and put it in their collections."

Simkins has heard this before and has an answer for critics: All someone has to do is look, feel and smell Digital Leather's products and they will realize they are dealing with the same old stuff. The only difference? The design possibilities are endless.

Simkins added that impressions of the product will change when it reaches the mass market. His company already is testing products for some of the biggest corporations: General Motors, Ford, Mercedes, Honda, Coach, Louis Vuitton, Nike and Columbia Sportswear.

The auto industry alone uses 4 billion of the 18 billion square feet of leather sold each year. Capturing just part of that market would generate hundreds of millions of dollars in annual sales.

The technology allows leather to be printed multiple colors

at the same time, and that could lead to mass customization.

A company like Nike could set up a Web site that allows customers to design their own sneakers.

"You and I and Art could order green and blue shoes with my photo on one, yours on another and Art's on a third, and we can get all those shoes cut out of the same hide and have them delivered to us by the end of the week," Simkins said. "That's huge."

Digital Leather has no intention of conquering the world on its own. It will sell the rights to license its technology to major companies, which will instruct suppliers to set up manufacturing operations based on Digital Leather's specifications. Those manufacturers will then have to buy Digital Leather's film to reproduce images on an ongoing basis.

The company also is setting up a small manufacturing plant in Sarasota and perhaps a larger one in China to handle production jobs for boutique manufacturers.

The Sarasota plant, in a 22,000-square-foot warehouse behind the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, will be capable of printing a million square feet of leather per year, equivalent to 250,000 sneakers or 20,000 armchairs. That will require at least a dozen manufacturing employees. But Sarasota will never be a manufacturing hub for

the product.

"The operation here in Sarasota will be a material science company, not a manufacturing company," Simkins said.

From concept to market

Simkins and Lambert, who founded LexJet in 1994 and built it into a company with more than \$40 million in annual sales, have become respected experts at using computer printers to put images on virtually any material.

LexJet's original mission was to cater to wide-format print shops, the companies that produce large images for trade shows and outdoor advertising banners. The company provided those businesses with paper, printers, ink and technological know-how and later expanded by offering the same products and services to professional photographers.

Besides LexJet, Simkins and Lambert created a less visible but more influential company called Abaqa, which creates chemical coatings that are applied to materials to enhance digital images and keep ink from running.

So when Mobbatt, a British inventor renowned for developing a way to print on music CDs, came to Abaqa three years ago asking how to affix a revolutionary plastic coating to leathers shoes, he was in the right place.

When plastic is applied to



Ron Simkins, CEO of SIF Technology, poses with a leather chair that illustrates his company's ability to print a full range of colors onto leather.

STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

leather, it usually dominates the leather, making it harder and less flexible. But the "shape memory polymer" that Mobbatt was working with allowed the leather to dominate the plastic. The result was a lighter, more durable, scuff-resistant surface that was far more comfortable to wear.

After three years of research and a \$5 million investment, Simkins, Lambert and Mobbatt realized they had a product that could be applied in myriad ways.

It not only allowed for the printing of indelible images onto leather for the first time, it also could make leather a standardized product — by taking a photo

graph of a perfect piece of leather and affixing that image to an imperfect hide.

"Every cow is different and hides can come with blemishes," said John Crumbaugh, Digital Leather's testing chief. "Auto manufacturers want all their leather to look the same. By using our technology they can do that."

Though printing on leather is more expensive than traditional tanning, doing it the Digital Leather way creates less waste, reducing cost, Crumbaugh said.

In the past, if a company wanted to make a leather chair, it would have to order 90 square feet of leather — the equivalent of three cow hides. But because digital leather allows more of each hide to be used, a manufacturer can order at least a third less material.

With testing complete, the next step is to set up the pilot plant and begin configuring leather processing machinery that has been ordered from Italy.

Once that is complete in three to four months, Digital Leather will begin helping licensees set up plants around the world.

Simkins said he hopes to operate the company for five years, then sell it or take it public.

"Both Art and I are in our 60s and we don't intend to be involved after 2013," Simkins said. "But Sarasota should be the center of intellectual activity involving leather for many years to come."

