

Milestones

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Second-generation family owners Kevin Czachor, Kathy Kelley and Marty Czachor Jr. (second, third and fourth in the front row) with some of the ASD team. (Photo courtesy of ASD)

ANSWERING SERVICE FOR DIRECTORS

50 Years

...and Going Strong

The year was 1972. The first video game console called the Magnavox Odyssey was released. The first-generation Honda Civic was introduced to automobile consumers. Americans got their first taste of Snapple and Stove Top stuffing.

In Glenolden, Pennsylvania, Marty Sr. and Barbara Czachor established Answering Service Dispatch, working with locally based businesses who physically wired their phone lines to their building.

Fast forward 50 years.

The Magnavox Odyssey is obsolete, replaced by games that harness the power of virtual reality and augmented reality. The 11th generation Honda Civic can now be found on roadways through the United States. Snapple, which started with a single flavor (apple), now offers 27 different flavors, while Stove Top stuffing now sells upward of 60 million boxes at Thanksgiving.

At ASD, Marty Sr. and Barbara Czachor have retired from day-to-day operations of the company, turning the reins over to their children – Marty Czachor Jr., Kevin Czachor and Kathy Kelley. In the mid-1990s, the company made the decision to work exclusively with funeral professionals, changing its name to ASD – Answering Service for Directors. By 2006, ASD had expanded operations and moved from a small office in Glenolden to its current headquarters in Media, Pennsylvania. Through it all, in ways large and small, ASD has continued to innovate to improve their little piece of the world by improving communication and helping those who are dedicated to helping others.

Looking back, the Czachors could never have imagined that a half-century later their company would become the leading answering service for funeral homes, working with more than 7,000 of them across the country ... yet that's exactly where ASD is in 2022.

The Early Years

It was in 1971 that Marty Sr. and Barbara Czachor started Alarm System Design. A year later, the couple launched their answering service – Answering Service Dispatch. When the company became funeral home exclusive, it made sense to keep the abbreviation the same and change the name to Answering Service for Directors.

Establishing ASD was work ... a lot of hard work. But the Czachors were not afraid of a boots-on-the-ground approach to get their business up and running.

“Establishing a brand-new company, especially one that runs 24 hours a day, isn't easy,” the couple said. “We had to be committed to it and willing to work hard every day.”

There were many lessons to be learned by the Czachor children in those early days of ASD.

“When I was very young and the business was just starting out, my parents would often discuss staffing levels and finances,” Kathy Kelley remembered. “Their focus was always on the people who counted on them for employment. They never lost sight of how important that was for the success of the business.”

From an early age, her parents showed Kathy and her siblings the value of fostering a business culture of absolute integrity and transparency.

“They demonstrated how doing the right thing will often pay in dividends,” she said. “I think the best example of this is the decision they made to record calls when no other answering service was doing that. They didn't want to own an answering service that tried to hide things from clients or that couldn't stand behind the quality of their employees. It was the right thing to do, but it also proved to be the thing that set ASD apart and made many funeral homes trust us to answer the phones.”

Watching his parents build the family business not only taught Kevin Czachor about the value of hard work and determination, but also how to treat people.

“They were always looking to hire and work with those who were loyal and had a strong commitment to the long-term goals of our company,” Kevin said. “I learned from watching them during those early stages how crucial it was to have employees you can rely on to succeed in business. Some of the very first employees my parents hired, like our operations director, Ric Cusumano, and operations manager Sharon Batten, are still an integral part of our team today.”

Building a Family Legacy

ASD's success, the Czachors are quick to point out, did not happen overnight.

“It took many years, with the goal of constantly improving and developing systems that were more efficient,” Marty Sr. and Barbara said. “There was never a moment when we felt like we had crossed a finish line since we were always working hard to make our answering service better.”



The Czachor family through the years. (Photos courtesy of ASD)

And there was never a thought when the elder Czachors founded ASD that it would go on to become a generational business ... but that's exactly what has happened.

Marty Jr. was the first to officially join ASD in 1990 after graduating from Drexel University.

Interested in technology since he was young (his first computer was a Sinclair ZX81), Marty Jr. had wanted to develop software to help people be more efficient.

"I looked at our business

challenges (24/7) and viewed them as opportunities," said Marty Jr., who now serves as ASD's chief technology officer. "I tried to maintain that viewpoint as our business continues to grow. For example, in the early days, we had one person work the graveyard shift (11 p.m. to 7 a.m.). We had two employees covering the seven weekdays. This was such a dangerous position to be in. Sickness, vacation, or if one person quit – had the potential to devastate our entire business operation. So, we took steps

to ensure we were not reliant upon one person, ever."

While Kevin always knew he wanted to join the family business, he wasn't sure in what capacity.

"When I was growing up, in addition to the answering service, my parents also ran an alarm company, so I was more involved with that end of the business," he said. "I can vividly recall waking up early on the weekends as a teenager to go out on alarm system calls with our alarm technician. My parents wanted their

children to develop a strong work ethic from an early age.

"In college, I studied marketing and psychology. I have always been fascinated by the way the human brain functions and how that influences our decision-making," Kevin explained.

Like his older brother, Kevin was involved with the family's business his entire life. He didn't officially become a part of the day-to-day operations until 1991 after finishing his degree at Widener University.

"It was shortly after this that nationwide toll-free call forwarding was introduced, opening the door for ASD to begin marketing our answering service exclusively to the funeral profession," said Kevin, now ASD's chief marketing officer. "My role became focused on ways we could expand our client base to work with more funeral professionals across the United States.

"If you're someone like me who grew up during the '80s, you're probably familiar with the film 'Field of Dreams' and that famous line, 'If you build it, they will come.' In many ways, this idea encapsulates how our company approached sales and marketing in those early years," Kevin added. "Promoting a service is much easier when you truly believe in the value of what you are offering."

At the time, Kevin pointed out, there were no other answering services in operation that specialized in funeral home phone calls. "Furthermore, we were the first answering service to allow clients to listen to recordings of their calls," he said. "These two qualities immediately set ASD apart from the thousands of other answering services across the country. As time went on, my brother Marty's programming abilities allowed us to take that unrivaled specialization to the next level, customizing every aspect of our answering service for funeral homes."

The last Czachor sibling to join ASD was Kathy, who began in 1994.

"This was right around the time when nationwide toll-free call forwarding made it possible for ASD

ASD'S TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMATION

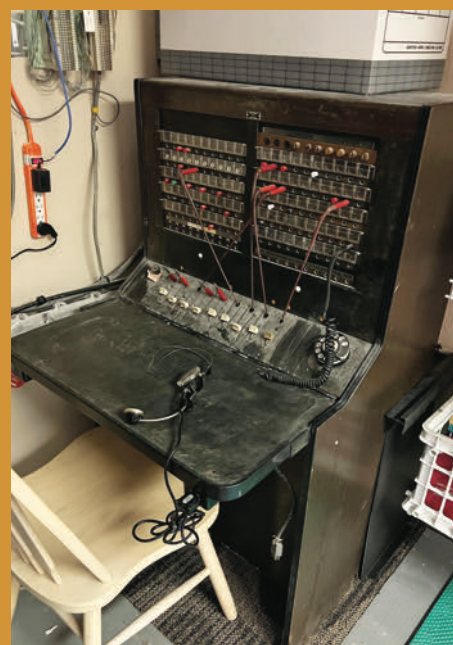
In 1986, ASD transitioned from switchboards to its first computerized phone system called Rolla (from a company in Rolla, Missouri). This high-tech system enabled ASD to see 10 lines of information on green monitors.

One of the early projects (circa 1987) Marty Czachor Jr. worked on while he was still attending Drexel University was an automated call counting system that helped them identify which clients had the highest call volume and required the most labor to support.

The technology was very limited, and a simple thing like counting calls was not trivial. Back then, the phone systems were extremely expensive and had very limited capabilities. In fact, ASD's entire client base was limited to its local geographic area, requiring the phone company to run a direct line from their client's business to the ASD offices. The entire geographic range that ASD could service was originally limited to a 2-to-3-mile radius.

ASD remained on this Rolla system until October 1990, when the company upgraded to the newest technology available from Cadcom Corp. – the LineMaster 3600. This system was much more advanced, allowing ASD to type messages directly into the computer. It was a great system, but ASD began outgrowing it a few years later. ASD then developed custom software, StationMaster, that enabled the company to provide messaging services to clients in multiple time zones.

StationMaster software has been officially updated with more than 10,000 revisions since its inception. It is a highly flexible messaging platform specifically developed for ASD's funeral industry clientele. Each and every line of code has been written in-house and is easy to change if a new need arises. With each version update, ASD's systems have become more advanced and flexible, allowing the company to tailor every account to meet the individual needs of its funeral home clients.





Clockwise from top left: Marry Czachor Sr. hard at work shortly after launching ASD. Answering service technology has certainly come a long way since the days of giant rolodex-style paper message systems used in the 1980s. A young Marty Czachor Jr. with his first computer. (Photos courtesy of ASD)

to begin expanding beyond our local area,” she recalled. “I remember this being a very busy and exciting time because we were just beginning to understand what was possible.

“We used to talk a lot as a family about where we saw the company going and what direction we should take. Initially, we were open to handling calls for all types of businesses, but my mom began to notice how kind and courteous our funeral director clients were,” Kathy said. “It was more than just taking a name, phone number and message ... they truly cared about how their callers were treated and that really resonated with us. We began to consider, what if we just worked exclusively with funeral homes? Those early discussions really laid down the roots for us to become the company we are today.”

Like her brothers, Kathy vividly remembers that her parents’ focus was always on the people who counted on them for employment, never losing sight of how important that was for the success of the business.

Moving Forward

In 2000, Marty Sr. and Barbara retired from the day-to-day functions at ASD, leaving the company in the hands of second-generation owners Kathy, Marty Jr. and Kevin. While the company had accomplished much already, the best was yet to come, ASD’s founder said.

“It was really our children who achieved the majority of our milestones,” the elder Czachors said. “Marty Jr. taking over in technology. Kathy, after 10 years with another company, came on board and took over the financial part of the business. Kevin, right after college came on board and took over our sales and marketing.”

Their children’s biggest strength, the couple is quick to add, “is their ability to work well together while each of them having their own area of expertise. They are honest, reliable and all have integrity which are three of the most



Clockwise from top left: To commemorate its 40th anniversary, ASD unveiled a new logo in 2012. ASD call specialists at work in the company's Media, Pennsylvania, headquarters. ASD's original headquarters in Glenolden, Pennsylvania. (Photos courtesy of ASD)

essential qualities for any business owner to have.”

So, what is it like working with family on a daily basis?

“Fortunately, the three of us are all different and each have our own strengths and weaknesses,” Kathy said. “Growing up together, we have inherently learned what each of us do the best. When delegating responsibilities, it’s easy for us to determine which one of us will excel at any given task. It also helps that there are three of us, so if two of us ever have opposing viewpoints, we always have a tie breaker.”

“My sister, Kathy, brother, Marty, and I wear many hats. We believe that no detail or job is too small,” Kevin added. “So, while I am officially responsible for ASD’s sales and marketing, on any given day I might be sitting in on one of our training classes or pulling weeds outside to ensure our property looks presentable. I believe it is this all-hands-on-deck mentality that has been the key to our family’s success.”

For Marty Jr., the strongest benefit of working in a family business is both simple and profound. “You can know with certainty that each family member is truly motivated to grow the business,” he said. “We don’t always agree on everything, but this allows us to see different perspectives and make the best decision to grow our business.”

And grow the business is exactly what the

ASD TURNS 50:

A TIMELINE OF PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN THE COMPANY'S HISTORY

- In 1972, Marty Sr. and Barbara Czachor established Answering Service Dispatch in Glenolden, Pennsylvania.
- In the early 1990s, ASD transitioned to an automatic answering service system that was entirely computerized. As part of this change, the company began utilizing CadCom Telesystems's suite of answering service products. This included the LineMaster system, which was the first digital integrated switch to be aimed specifically at answering services, as well as the StationMaster system which was the first software utilized by ASD's answering service agents.
- Nationwide toll-free calling is introduced in the mid-1990s, allowing ASD to expand to businesses outside of their local area. Soon after, ASD makes the decision to work exclusively with funeral professionals and change its name to ASD — Answering Service for Directors.
- By the end of the 1990s, Vice President Marty Czachor Jr. has created the very first version of ASD's customizable answering service.
- Around 1998, ASD begins recording calls for clients to review in a voicemail box, becoming the first answering service in operation to do so. Along with this upgrade, ASD also introduces a RingTracker feature that notifies clients what ring each call was answered on.
- In 2000, ASD founders Marty Czachor Sr. and Barbara Czachor retire from the day-to-day functions at ASD.
- In 2006, ASD expands operations and moves to its current headquarters in Media, Pennsylvania.
- ASD attends its first National Funeral Directors Association convention in 2006 in Philadelphia.
- In 2007, ASD transitioned its answering service operations from an antique analogue process to a modern and secure digital system.
- Integrations with other funeral home websites and software companies lead ASD to introduce a new FuneralSync solution in 2009; the feature allows clients to automatically transfer first call data and obituary information between ASD and other funeral home software programs.
- In 2010, ASD releases its First Call Alert and First Call Connect features which immediately alerts clients when ASD begins taking a first call for their funeral home and gives them the option to connect into the call while in progress.

second-generation family member owners have been able to do.

In 2006, ASD moved its headquarters to Media, Pennsylvania. The new facility, in addition to offering more office space, allowed the company to invest in multiple redundancies to protect clients' sensitive phone calls.

A year later, ASD transitioned answering service operations from an antique analogue process to a modern and secure digital system.

Innovative solutions began in earnest. FuneralSync (2009) allows clients to automatically transfer first call data and obituary information between ASD and other funeral home software programs. First Call Alert and First Call Connect (2010) alerts clients when ASD begins taking a first call for their funeral home and gives them the option to connect into the call while in progress. In 2011, ASD Mobile for iPhone was introduced; ASD Mobile for Android followed a year later.

In 2012, ASD won the first of its four Innovation Awards presented by the National Funeral Directors Association.

This innovative spirit, Kevin says, comes from ASD's desire and commitment to make life easier for funeral professionals.

"We see firsthand how dedicated funeral directors are to giving families the care and attention they need. However, they are pulled in so many different directions and need support to help juggle all the many things they must manage at once," he said. "ASD's technology innovations were born out of discovering a common problem shared by funeral directors and developing a new solution. The key to this is our relationships with our clients."

Marty Jr. agrees, adding that the company's focus is always "on our clients and solving problems."

ASD attends a number of state and national conventions every year, always asking clients what more the company can do for them. Among the questions asked is, "What are the biggest challenges you face daily or weekly?"

“One client had mentioned to us a few years back (2016) at the NFDA that his biggest challenge was that ASD contacts him very quickly with his important calls. He then hesitated and said, ‘But the big problem I have, you can’t fix.’

“I remember saying, ‘So, what is the challenge?’ He said, ‘I’m out of the office, and I need to quickly call them back – on my cell phone. And now they have my cell phone number, and this is the only number they will call,’” Marty Jr. said, recalling the conversation. “The ASD Tech Team talked about this challenge, and within one week we had developed MobileFH, allowing all funeral directors to benefit from solving this one person’s problem.”

As a company, Marty Jr. added, “ASD allows itself to be under constant evolution and invest a lot of time communicating with our customers and employees to make sure there isn’t a better or more efficient way of doing things.”

That constant evolution was never more critical than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASD was able to successfully transition into a fully remote company almost overnight in large part because several major weather events, including Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012, prompted the company to begin planning for a situation in which employees might need to work from their homes.

“When the lockdown orders were first issued, about 70% of our staff already had home computer equipment so we were able to very quickly take steps to switch to a fully remote system. As time went on, ASD took additional steps to fully support our new work-from-home office model including the development of remote hiring and training solutions as well as many hardware and software upgrades to our system at large,” Kevin said.

As owners it was heartbreaking watching the number of death calls ASD staff handled for so many families across the United States, Kathy said.

ASD TURNS 50:

A TIMELINE OF PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN THE COMPANY’S HISTORY

- In 2012, Hurricane Sandy strikes ASD’s local area but the company stays ahead of the storm by providing accommodations so that more than 50 employees can shelter overnight in their building. This event prompts ASD to begin exploring remote solutions so that in the future staff can work from home when necessary.
- During the 2014 NFDA Convention, ASD releases a new version of ASD Mobile that includes an updated interface and a new feature called MobileFH, which allows funeral homes to call any number from their cell phone and display the funeral home’s main business line as their outgoing Caller ID.
- In 2016, a new Deep Archive Message Search solution is introduced, which automatically saves ASD messages and call recordings for clients for up to 10 years while allowing them to easily search through their message history.
- Also in 2016, ASD introduced the company’s Suicide Telephone Operator Patch (S.T.O.P) System which connects call specialists to experienced suicide hotline operators. This system allows ASD to seamlessly transfer calls from people who are in crisis to a suicide hotline without ever putting the caller on hold.
- After a decade of actively building up its bilingual staff, ASD grows the company’s Spanish-speaking team to over 35 employees by 2017.
- In early 2018, ASD introduces a Web Form WatchDog feature which monitors web forms submitted on funeral home websites and alerts the on-call director when an urgent need is communicated.
- In 2019, ASD introduces a new MobileFH Texting feature which allows funeral homes to send and receive text messages using their funeral home’s main business phone number as the outgoing Caller ID.
- In March 2020, ASD took steps to seamlessly move all of the company’s operations to an entirely remote system in response to the pandemic.
- In May 2021, ASD records the 10,000th-version update to the company’s answering service system.
- In 2022, ASD officially turned 50!



“When you think about being on the ‘front lines,’ one usually envisions those who are physically responding to the pandemic, but there was also an invisible front line handling the emotional fallout caused by COVID-19,” she said. “For ASD Call Specialists, April 2020 was especially difficult. For a period of time, ASD was handling thousands more death calls per day than our typical average. The overwhelming calls in the New York City area crippled the death-care industry and caused dreadful backlogs like never before. Our staff was forced to adapt to this extraordinary event in ways we never could have imagined before. For weeks at a time during COVID’s busiest peaks, almost every single employee was told to focus on incoming client calls. Only essential tasks were completed.”

The situation was unlike anything the company had ever gone through in decades of handling calls for funeral professionals, Kathy added, and it was important for ASD to support its staff.

“One of the simplest yet most important ways we supported our





Opposite page (clockwise from top left): The ASD team at the 2018 NFDA convention. Marty Sr. and Barbara Czachor. Family-friendly events are part of ASD's culture. Marty Czachor Jr. with his daughter, Jessica. This page: ASD is a four-time recipient of the National Funeral Directors Association's Innovation Award. (Photos courtesy of ASD)

staff was by acknowledging the heart-break they were encountering and praising their efforts continually through the pandemic," Kathy said. "There was nothing that could be done to stop the surge in funeral home telephone activity or to alleviate the upsetting nature of the calls we were answering. Yet, making sure our staff knew that their hard work was being seen and appreciated helped to lessen the weight of that burden."

Facing the Future

There is little question that technology will continue to be a major contributor to ASD's long-term success in the years to come.

"It is not a typical thing for an answering service company to develop their own custom-built technology in-house. Most utilize third-party software and are therefore at the mercy of those vendors who do not work directly for their company or their clientele," Kevin pointed out. "ASD's flexible technology programs and in-house tech team have allowed our company to remain highly innovative,

developing multiple patented solutions no other answering service can offer. We are deeply committed to seeking out new solutions to help death-care professionals as well as the families they serve. This constant goal has been central to our company's identity and to the development of numerous cutting-edge technologies."

Text messaging has become a dominant form of communication in our society, and there is no doubt it can be instrumental in helping death-care professionals forge lasting connections with families.

"The in-house technical team here at ASD has had a front-row seat in observing how text messaging has altered funeral home communication over the past two decades. While telephone calls will always play a vital role in the funeral business, text messaging is also a key component in shaping the customer service experience of funeral home consumers," Kevin said. "This is why our company has been focused on developing new text-messaging tools specifically to help death-care

professionals enhance their communication with families, save time and gain more freedom on the go."

ASD's continued success will also be driven by the third generation of the Czachor family who are making their way into the business.

"As the business has evolved, it has now created opportunities for our 11 grandchildren if they so choose," Marty Sr. and Barbara said. "So far, three have joined (Kathy's daughter Melissa McNamara and son Joseph Kelley and Marty's daughter, Jessica Czachor) and two who are in college interned at ASD this past summer (Kevin's daughter Addie Czachor and Marty's son Andrew Czachor)."

And for the couple who started it all, there's excitement heading into a sixth decade of operation.

"The most exciting thing is how much ASD has been able to grow while still staying dedicated to meeting the needs of our clients and doing the best job we can for our funeral directors," Marty Sr. and Barbara said. •