



Design Wise

A Mankato telecommunications firm enhances its visibility, recruits employees and marks a city entrance with its new headquarters building *By Camille LeFevre*



Project team (from left to right): Keith Haff, Bryan Paulsen, AIA, Meray Massad-Rhame, Greg Borchert (Michael Krager, AIA, Lyn Diefenderfer not pictured).

Ten years ago, when Midwest Wireless Communications opened for business, Dennis Miller was the company's sole employee. Today he's president of the regional telecommunications firm. By the end of the year, Midwest Wireless will post \$130 million in revenues and support 429 employees. In addition, the company's new headquarters building has become a Mankato landmark that's raised the bar for architectural design in southern Minnesota.

"We have an elegant facility that's extraordinarily functional," Miller says, "but many people have thanked me for building the first 'Minneapolis' building in the area. People are recognizing that the facility is well-designed. It's a step up and out of the boxes people are

used to seeing around here, and it's setting a new standard."

The company's headquarters, sited on 12 acres next to Highway 14, the "gateway" to Mankato's east side, "needed to project a positive image for the client and the city," recalls Bryan Paulsen, AIA, principal, Paulsen Architects, Mankato. To convey strength and a high-tech feel, the project team specified gray and black granite-like precast concrete and architectural metals on the structure's exterior.

They designed a 150-foot, curved-glass curtain wall to acknowledge "the idea of constant motion important to a telecommunications business," he says. The project team also invested the 78,000-square-foot building with an ingenious design. From the circular central lobby



or “hub” of the building, three “wing walls” radiate at 120-degree angles in imitation of the three guy wires that anchor a telecommunications tower.

Miller admits that, at first, he had trouble getting out of the box himself and embracing Paulsen’s design. “I’m conservative,” he explains, “so I asked Bryan to build me a box and then we’d put a little box on top for management. It would be very functional.”

But Paulsen discovered, during his research in the programming or predesign phase of the project, that the rapidly growing company would need far more space than it anticipated in the next 15 years. In addition, Midwest Wireless needed a design that would support its interactive matrix of relationships between departments.



“We presented several concepts to Dennis, including the box, which he kept returning to,” Paulsen says, “but we reminded him of how the employees interact and the departments function” in Midwest Wireless’s highly collaborative workplace. During a typical day, personnel from

Three wing walls radiate from the front entrance of the building (top); the cubicle area and executive offices to the west; the curved curtain wall to the north; and a stand-alone sculptural element to the south.



The entrance of the building opens into a circular lobby or hub (top), which features second-floor balconies, a domed skylight (above left) and a star-of-the-north terrazzo floor (above right).

one department consult with staff from various other departments. Sometimes they meet informally; other times in conference and training rooms. "This design promotes an easy flow of information among employees and between departments," Paulsen adds, "as the lobby/conference area provides a central location to disseminate information."

After a month, Miller says, "I finally realized how much better this concept is. We've got a building that's not only functional but cost effective, and has created for us an image that is recognized throughout the region."

Because of its three-pronged design, the building sports three different façades emanating from the main entrance. To the south side of the entrance is a stand-alone "wing wall" with

sculptural cut-outs and a decorative metal shade. The entrance itself opens into the circular lobby or hub with a star-of-the-north terrazzo floor and a domed skylight over a three-story atrium.

Extending north from the lobby is the curved-glass wing wall, which houses conference and training rooms named for historical figures: Einstein, Gutenberg, the Curies. When not in use by employees, this public area, in addition to the lobby, is available days and evenings for community gatherings.

An elevator adjacent to the lobby leads to the executive area with balconied offices, which adjoins a third form to the west that contains cubicles for customer-service, engineering and accounting departments. This rectangular box is designed for easy expansion, Paulsen explains. By removing the exterior wall, contractors can build up to 40,000 square feet of additional workspace, then enclose the addition by replacing the exterior wall.

How do employees like the design of the interior workspaces? "I can quantify it," Miller says. "This is a tight labor market. Since we moved in, in April 2000, we've had more than 1,500 unsolicited applicants. We get most of our new hires referred from existing employees, so we know we've created an environment that people want to work in."

Paulsen's programming made all the difference, Miller continues. "I'm impressed with the time they took to lead us through all of our considerations. That process resulted in a building that came in under budget and on time." While Midwest Wireless will need to expand faster than expected—"We completed a transaction and grew more quickly than we thought we would," Miller says—programming helped the company plan for that eventuality.

"Because of this project," Miller adds, "I'm a real believer in design. It helps with employee recruitment and retention, and our company visibility. This building is now Mankato's number-one identifier. We're over the small-town image. Now, we're a regional hub."

Midwest Wireless Communications
Headquarters
Mankato, Minnesota
Paulsen Architects, Mankato, Minnesota



The lobby and the curved-glass wing wall with its conference and training rooms (above) are available for community gatherings when not in use by employees.

