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WFED-AM 1050, Federal News Radio – “Tech Talk with John Gilroy”

John Gilroy: Today we are speaking with Russ Hall, CEO of Macfadden. How are you doing today Russ?

Russ Hall: Well, good morning John. It's a pleasure to be here.

JG: Great. The reason I chose Russ is because he has an unusual company. Founded in 1986, Macfadden is an employee-owned company. And when you think of companies, you think they want to go crush the competition you know, it's like Woody Hayes crushing his opponent. But Macfadden has a different approach- Macfadden likes to focus in on humanitarian projects. What they do is they focus on trying to help agencies reach goals with humanitarian projects which is kind of a strange notion. I mean rather than look at the competition they look at the customer, try to find out what their needs and requirements are, and move from there. They've been doing it for 20 years very successfully so they were either real lucky or real smart. So tell me about this strange notion of humanitarian projects and how did it all start?

RH: Well, to your point, I think we've been both. I think we've been lucky and smart as you have to be to be successful in the federal government. That's right, for 20 years we've been able to provide a variety of IT project support to a wide array of federal government customers. I've have seen many changes. I started in federal government contracting in 1998, 1988 rather, and seen many changes technology wise, business-wise. I've been the CEO of Macfadden since 2004 and some of our core services that we provide are integrated IT services, program and project management, business consulting. We do have a focus as you mentioned in the disaster management/humanitarian area, disaster response, as well as health IT.

JG: Good. You know a typical listener, and if I could look through this microphone, our typical listener is an IT professional, and typically he or she is bombarded with deadlines, staff reduction, increasing responsibilities. They are very frustrated, about to jump out the basement window, and so you've got frustrated IT professionals here and they are looking at Macfadden. So give me in a nutshell what kind of services you could possibly provide for a beleaguered IT administrator or IT professional.

RH: Sure. I mean, I think we've provided in our history a wide array of services. In terms of basically “doing more with less”, I know that's a big buzz word out there, a big theme, Macfadden has always been able to deliver. It's really been our people, graduating from the minority owned program, the 8(a) program, through the SBA we've been able to basically sustain ourselves and remain profitable, and are looking to a transformation of the company, so we've got a lot of folks that are energized, being employee-owned, that we can do more. Our folks are extra energized to deliver the mail for the customers now that they are employee-owned folks but what we got I think is a blend of technology experts as well as business process consultants that can look at the mission, look at the objective. We've done a good job of being able to think on our feet, and being somewhat agnostic in the technology area, deliver the right tool for the requirements that's at hand.

JG: I spent about an hour at your website this morning and I always go through the press releases to see what kind of adventures you guys are on. It's interesting that a person was promoted at your company and her title is Director of Humanitarian Affairs. I think that kind of, that's the story in a nutshell isn't it? Director of Humanitarian Affairs, there's got to be some compassion there or something?

RH: Absolutely, and this is an interesting segment of our company because we have folks that at the drop of a hat are raising their hand to go to places where there is conflict: Darfur, Sudan, Indonesia, for tsunami relief. It's just incredible how folks are so energized to really make a difference out there. That passion actually bleeds throughout the company.

JG: You know if you're sitting in Kansas and you read the newspaper about the tsunami, you think, "Well, the government will help". Here in Washington, D.C., people like the USAID are running around, bouncing off the walls, working 18-hour days, that's the pressure. And that's where you guys fit in, you work with organizations like the USAID, is that right?

RH: That's correct: USAID, main State Department, providing humanitarian and disaster support. So we've been able to have a successful track record and really become a trusted partner with those agencies.

JG: Reviewing your press releases there is something with maps and tsunamis in the Third World. What kind of activities have you performed in the area of geography and mapping?

RH: Sure. One of the components on an engagement we have with USAID is in support of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. We have been providing that type of support for about 6 years: program/project management. The technological component of that is the delivery of geographic information services and cartographic services, basically map making, rendering of good information to make better decisions in these areas of conflict and natural disasters around the world.

JG: The emotional word is a "heightened situation". I'm sure my son would say the super bowl is a "heightened situation", but around the world it's a lot more important than that. So you work with organizations to help them when they deal with, is that the phrase, heightened situations?

RH: Yes, heightened situations. "Complex emergencies" is another descriptor that is out there. You know we've been able to assist USAID, for example, just in 2006 alone, responding to 74 international disasters that affected about 173 million people worldwide in 50-plus countries. So really it's part of the US foreign policy being able to be a provider of information, good information, making better decisions, and also making sure that the US humanitarian response is timely and on point.

JG: You know many people are listening to this program with a computer, maybe in France, maybe in Somalia, maybe who knows where, and so you bring up the topic of GIS, all the sudden that starts to ring home. And that an important topic for your company, isn't it?

RH: It absolutely is. It's a connectivity. You know we've got folks that are working for example, supporting folks that are volunteers for the Peace Corps, working in these remote regions that are accessible only by I guess what's been called "Bureau Express". I mean you get on a mule and there's only one way in or out. And now these folks have connectivity through satellite phones and voice over IP, and technologies like that. It's really amazing that we can reach out to them.

JG: Later in the program we were going to talk about VoIP and how you felt organizations manage their VoIP deployment. Tell me about these maps, I mean there is all kinds of maps out there, current maps, old maps, high-quality maps, fuzzy maps, I guess maps that you can read on your PDA, you work with all that technology?

RH: That's correct. I like to think the discriminator that our services have over perhaps just maps in general is the level of customization, the level of detail, level of data layering I think that these maps represent. I mean when you think about it, if there's a response around the world that requires folks to go out and do initial assessments in a disaster area, they'll have to have a

situation report, they'll know where the hot spots are, know where all the problems are, what to avoid, know where the resources are, so we've been able to identify by applying this technology to pretty stable data sets the situation reports, so that folks have the best information to them to basically get the right aid to where it needs to go.

JG: So it's quick and that the keyword here. So there's no delay. The quicker you can respond to emergencies there will be fewer people hurting?

RH: Rapid response. Absolutely. Saving lives, alleviating human suffering, these are all human factors that are a common thread through all the work that Macfadden does right now.

JG: I think if there is a senior in college now that's listening considering where to work might be a good idea because a lot of students, I have one college student by the way at home, and they are thinking what kind of company, should I work for this Macfadden and why? Is it going to help anybody? And I think it's a good idea that people are aware of a wide variety of companies that work with organizations and help them achieve some of these lofty goals but I think real practical, down-to-earth goals.

RH: Yes, we like to talk about technology with a heart so hopefully that will be a course.

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JG: You are listening to Federal Tech Talk with John Gilroy on Federal News Radio AM1050. Today we are speaking with Russ Hall, CEO of Macfadden. So it's not Macfadden Incorporated its just Macfadden?

RH: We have rebranded ourselves; we are just Macfadden, legally Macfadden and Associates [Inc.], but we go by Macfadden.

JG: Founded by a gentleman named?

RH: James R., Jim Macfadden.

JG: What a coincidence?

RH: There you go, the namesake.

JG: He's got a good story too, doesn't he?

RH: He does. Jim's an interesting fellow. He's a deaf entrepreneur that founded the company in '86 as you said. The company is in transition, assuming 100% employee ownership this year, Jim will be moving on. A graduate of Galludet University, he looks to do a lot with the deaf student population, trying to get them jobs, so that's really where his heart is.

JG: So maybe when he was growing up he developed some kind of empathy for others and maybe it's his fruit 20 years later.

RH: Absolutely. His values still ring crystal clear within the company.

JG: First part of the show we talked about USAID. Let me make a transition here and talk a little about health care. I think everyone listening is involved in healthcare, somehow or another. You've worked with organizations in health care to, specifically in areas of medical coding and healthcare analytics, HIPPA compliance. Tell us a little story how you've helped agencies achieve some of the goals in this area.

RH: Sure, absolutely John. We've had the opportunity, I guess for the last 10 to 12 years, working

within the Department of Health and Human Services, particularly at the Food and Drug Administration, we have been able to apply information technology to improve their business processes, more efficient acquisition of information and data, to make better decisions with respect to safe drugs, food going to market. So we've worked on many of their mission critical applications there to make sure that the data integrity is there, that the processes are efficient, and that for example in the FDA case so that their mission is met.

JG: So we talk about data and retrieving data and it's important having accurate data, and it's also important to be quick. If you wait too long for an answer someone can die, not dieing of a tsunami in the Middle East somewhere, but could die on a hospital bed here locally. So, something as simple as search, so search capabilities can actually help people in emergency situations, so I've talked about search before. When I look at Microsoft's Vista, I always think of security, but I saw a demonstration, you know Microsoft's searching capabilities has really improved with some of this newer technology that they have. It takes a lot of sophistication to be able to perform quick searches, and that's what you've helped us do, isn't it.

RH: Absolutely it is. We are positioned right now, for example again with the FDA, as really their integrator of choice if you will, to be able to bring a wide variety of search technologies. The idea being to improve the speed of search across the vast immense of data set there. To allow these researchers and statisticians to do their real business which is actually analyzing the information to make sure that products going forward into market are safe rather than spend time in the actual search process. So the technology is allowing them to have greater efficiencies in their business.

JG: So there may be agencies that have data silos or islands or whatever term you want to use and so you've gone on and integrated different types of data so that it can be searchable over many different silos?

RH: That's correct. Trying to basically work across multiple platforms, even in our agency we've got a program within FDA to now branch out into the whole department. It is an integration project and we've got you know basically buy-in from many of the different centers that make up the FDA. So we are able to bring, I think to say, the arch technology there and we have a real good working relationship with all the software vendors.

JG: We talked earlier about the guy in Kansas reading his newspaper. Well actually your work with the FDA can help that guy in Kansas because it gives him access to information quicker, doesn't it? This is not just for agencies, it's for Joe-six-pack out in Kansas, isn't it?

RH: Absolutely. Thanks to the advent of the internet and so much more information traveling across the internet, things can be done much more quickly and better information and we've come to expect that, that's just the way things our now. Instant information, instant gratification.

JG: Structured product labeling, does that mean finding beans at the giant? What does structured product labeling?

RH: I should tell you that back in the old days, the pharmaceutical industry would basically send labels via snail mail, as many labels as they could fit into a pouch to the FDA for approval. The structured product labeling is a mission critical program within the FDA, and the idea is that via the web portal, a web gateway, which is basically what that application is, now the pharmaceutical industry has a much more expedient way of getting information to the FDA for approvals, it reduces the amount of time it takes for the approval process, and it also has additional security measures that just weren't in place before. With the advent of 9/11 there is so much that has to be considered now. Patient safety, basically the health community in general is improved by this type of project.

JG: The big fancy pants terms are business intelligence and systems integration, but I think when you try to drill down and say, “look people can get information quicker”, I think that’s better than saying business intelligence. I mean there is intelligence there but its delivering the product, which is safety isn’t it?

RH: Absolutely. It is ultimately, the mission is safety. The quicker they can get the information the quicker that they can get the drugs to the folks that need those.

JG: So tell me more about Enterprise Search and how you’ve used that in other organizations to bring up data quicker.

RH: Sure. The type of technology that we’ve worked with primarily its kind of a business to business search. Although, Google is out there, and Google is being explored by many agencies right now. Being able to do these complex taxonomy searches, they call them, allowing the scientific community to dig down and look at chemical composition of drugs and things like that. One of the products we’ve worked with is Convera’s Retrievalware and we integrate that at the FDA and its gotten a lot of use there. We’re looking at using that at other agencies. We’ve integrated that at the Social Security Administration, for example, Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Its basically, as you said, getting information faster, more accurately and a greater level of specificity in the returns that come from the search.

JG: So if an IT professional is listening to this show and scratching his or her head and wondering about how to access data quicker, in general, I mean of course you have a focus in the humanitarian area, but these techniques and skills can be applied to more than just humanitarian issues and healthcare issues, I would assume.

RH: Absolutely. I think they’re all very cross compatible. Within our company, we’ve had good successes for the customers and what we are trying to do now, really, is increase some lines of business around some of the successes we’ve had and reach out via interagency, or across many clients in the private sector, to provide some of the same solutions that we’ve provided for some of our key customers in the government.

JG: So we can use a phrase like “healthcare analytics”. So, data mining and quicker retrieval of the information can help with the whole concept of healthcare analytics?

RH: Absolutely, absolutely. We’ve got folks on our staff that are certified professionals in healthcare information management. I mean these are the yolk of people that we can bring to the projects, and I see that as a differentiator for the company as well: folks that are versed in the technology as well as the business side.

JG: Yes, it’s good to have technology with a heart.

RH: Absolutely.

JG: Great.

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JG: You are listening to Federal Tech Talk with John Gilroy on Federal News Radio AM1050. Today we are speaking with Russ Hall, CEO of Macfadden, not Macfadden Industries, just Macfadden.

RH: Macfadden, correct.

JG: So you can look them up on the internet and find out all the varied projects on there. We talked about Tsunamis, we talked about healthcare, and now we are going to turn focus on something that is

based in downtown DC, the Peace Corps. You've also worked with, in fact you have a long history of working with the Peace Corps, don't you?

RH: That's right John. We've seen many Peace Corps volunteers come and go, we've seen many technologies come and go down there as well, but they've been one of our very valued customers for 10 to 15 years.

JG: Anyone who reads the trade publications, *InfoWorld*, you can't help but seeing this topic VoIP. I mean "whew", we are going to do a couple programs in the next month just on VoIP. We are going to talk about security; we're going to talk about all kinds of issues here. You've helped manage some VoIP deployments for the Peace Corps and some other agencies, is that right?

RH: That's right. At the Peace Corps, for example, VoIP is currently available in about 20 countries, primarily in the Africa region, and that really has enhanced the communications there tremendously. These folks out in the field can now dial back to Washington, the regional offices, with the ability to report back on basically the successes they are having in the field and also their technical issues as well.

JG: Yeah, VoIP is just a terrific subject. I think I saw a headline that said "VoIP: 10 Years of Reducing Costs", I think that's the whole idea. If you have someone who is in the middle of nowhere they have to be able to get back in forth here and communicate, but in an efficient manner, but its much more than just helping with telecommunications. You've worked with all kinds of data center issues with Peace Corps as well?

RH: That's right. I mean even going back to the late 80's, early 90's, the big iron, IBM mainframe. We were fortunate enough to be able to provide some support on the mainframe data center there and develop their disaster recovery plans and so forth which is obviously very critical now after 9/11.

JG: So how has that changed for the Peace Corps since 9/11? Increased focus I'd assume.

RH: Absolutely. Absolutely. Not that disaster recovery wasn't important before but certainly there's a greater emphasis on it now. Continuity of operations and planning is certainly very hot right now. And we've had the opportunity to help them along the way developing plans and implementing those plans.

JG: You just said hot right now and I focused in on data center management. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that if you walked into the typical data center in an agency you could probably find they got a couple of those servers. I mean they are loud and noisy and this is the big problem coming in the next five or six years. People are saying "hey, number one issue is just how to cool down the data center".

RH: That's right.

JG: And just managing the data center. Step number one: manage it efficiently, step number two: how do you cool this thing down? Talking about 2011, not running out of physical space in the data center, running out of the ability to cool it. So you've helped with people manage data centers too, haven't you?

RH: We have. We've even helped clients like the Peace Corps cut over from the legacy mainframe to a distributed environment where you just have many, many servers in there as you say. We've basically allowed them to move to contemporary tools and contemporary storage and we've been there really walking hand in hand with them the whole time.

JG: Do they still use mainframe down there? Or what kind of technology are they using?

RH: Actually, they went lights out on mainframe about a year and half ago. It was interesting for Macfadden, as we had the mainframe support contract, it was kind of like, well we knew we were going to help them, we knew it was important to do that, it was kind of working our way out of a job essentially.

JG: Your job is to not be here.

RH: That's right. But we understood the reason for that, working with the office of the CIO. But we are still there, we still provide telecommunications and wireless support for the core. We're proud to do that.

JG: Disaster recovery, -hour subject, you know we can talk about all kinds of issues with disaster recovery. I imagine they would involve VoIP limitations and data. Peace Corps based here, any other regional offices or throughout the world?

RH: Right, there are. Obviously, their headquarters are in Washington, downtown, 20th and L at the Shriver building but there are regional offices that we support as well, domestically and internationally as well.

JG: So their call center is that for people who work for them, or vendors, what's a call center?

RH: The call center that is basically supported at headquarters is really for anybody coming into the corps. Folks calling in, even our staff fields calls in the cable room there, in terms of routing people to the right place within the organization, volunteers out in the field that have questions from everything from their benefits to other issues or technical issues. The call center that supports their data center there is in Washington and basically, the application owners that may have issues with some of the supporting hardware and software within the corps use that, use the trouble ticketing process, and we've enabled that for a number of years.

JG: Great. Well ladies and gentleman I'd just like to announce that Russ has brought into the studio within him a crystal ball. And he's going to look into it and tell me where Macfadden is going to be heading in the next four or five years. What are your directions? What are your goals?

RH: Oh gosh, this is really an exciting time for the company. It is. We are transitioning, we are becoming a 100% employee-owned, we're looking to do more and more for our customers and really be taking the work that we've done in the humanitarian and health care areas and looking to now move from the international stage to the domestic stage. We did a little bit of support in Katrina, but now we are really looking to capitalize on the successes that we've had internationally in those areas, as well is on the health IT side. We are looking to expand, we've got some great people with us now, but we are looking to attract and retain a whole new stable of folks that can move the company forward and do more for our customers.

JG: I like that technology with a heart . . . if I only had a heart. You've been listening to Federal Tech Talk with John Gilroy on Federal News Radio AM1050. I'd like to thank my guest Russ Hall, CEO of Macfadden for visiting today.

RH: Thank you John it's been a pleasure.