

According to Hession a dedication to customer centricity underlies Oceanos' success. "We help our clients understand how the data sets work within their particular marketing programs. Just because one database works for Sun Microsystems doesn't mean it will work well for Iron Mountain. We're coming to the table with much more of a strategic viewpoint. If we're not able to help our clients identify and reach out to their ideal prospects, then they're not going to be able to fill their pipeline as efficiently, and, at the end of the day, that's going to affect their stock price."

As for the future, although Hession has dismissed the idea of managing databases for major publishers and research companies, as that would compromise one of the company's key differentiators—*independence*—he has laid the tracks for growth in other areas.

In addition to Oceanos, Hession started two other companies: Bentley Promotions and Lighthouse. Bentley Promotions helps many Oceanos clients prepare for trade shows or provide gifts to clients by developing giveaway products. And Lighthouse complements Oceanos as well by focusing on data processing, print, and mail.

"Lighthouse makes it a little bit easier for our clients to order postal data and then utilize our sister company to handle the mail house and printer aspect of the program. It's a way for Oceanos to sell postal lists to clients and get around the apprehensiveness clients have if they haven't worked with printers or mail houses before. If we can give them the comfort of handling that for them, then they'll be more likely to order more postal data from Oceanos."

Clearly, Hession likes to make direct connections. ■

## Shroom to Grow. BY JENNIFER IVERS

**Aron Ponticelli** (MBA '99) understands what it means to grow a business...literally. Together with his father Jack Ponticelli, he founded Piedmont Valley Truffles, one of the leading growers and distributors of black truffles in the Western Hemisphere.

In addition to his role as president of Piedmont Valley Truffles, farmed in Surry and Yadkin Counties, North Carolina, he is also director of a Greenwich, Conn.-based financial software company providing enterprise solutions for investment management firms. Previously, he was a founding partner of a web-based transportation exchange and e-procurement ASP funded by Goldman Sachs, and he worked on Wall Street with Brown Brothers Harriman & Co. as a financial analyst.

How do you get from finance to fungi? It all started with Jack, Aron's creative and entrepreneurial father (who, among many, many other activities, has run a hot-air balloon business, is a woodworker and gunsmith, and now also helps train the truffle-sniffing dogs employed on the farms).



Jack talked truffles relentlessly for awhile and eventually Aron began to tune in. He worked on a business plan for the new venture ("thanks to the School of Management Starting New Ventures course") and began to network with bankers, angel investors, entrepreneurs, chefs, and others in his hometown of New York City.

Over the course of two years Jack and Aron completed the plan and successfully raised the initial capital to fund operations on 30 acres until the company was profitable. Realizing truffles could be made into a much larger business than just a few acres on a single farm, Aron believes cooperation among growers and distributors will benefit everyone, much like the early efforts of Robert Mondavi in Napa Valley during the 1970s benefitted the California wine industry in general.

"It's important to be open-minded and flexible when you're starting a business, and if quality of life is important to you, to be willing to take some risks and be patient. You never know where things might lead." In the case of truffles, it takes five to seven years for the host trees (filberts and oaks) to allow for truffle production. So Aron and his Dad took a big leap of faith in 2002 when they got started. However, Aron predicts that in 10 to 15 years, as a result of their efforts to grow the industry as well as the tubers, they'll be running a \$20 million business with a 75% profit margin. In addition, they're selling high quality organic truffle oil, and have plans to extend to truffle salt and other products. To learn more, visit them on the web at [www.nctruffles.com](http://www.nctruffles.com). ■

