

# Grand-Rapids based startup Brandmotion explores expansion into new industries

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Brandmotion LLC President Jeff Varick.

A Michigan supplier that develops "real estate" inside vehicles as connectivity systems for consumer electronics is growing through partnerships with larger companies and is now eyeing the state's appliance and furniture industries.

Brandmotion LLC has developed Apple-certified iPod integration systems for Ford Motor Co., Magellan navigation systems for the F-150 pickup truck and overhead rail modules that can accommodate options like power invertors for laptops and hands-free phone.

The Grand Rapids-based company is now exploring new markets after winning a contract with Whirlpool Corp. to bring digital photographs, iPods and cell phone capabilities to refrigerators.

The 3-year-old startup has averaged 240 percent growth over the last three years and surpassed \$1 million in revenue in 2008. It has capitalized on what founder and President Jeff Varick says is "an acute need for practical connectivity solutions for the portable electronics."

"We consider ourselves a fast-cycle innovation company," said Varick, an Ann Arbor resident who has worked for General Motors Corp. and Johnson Controls Inc.

"We're real clever with how we come up with ways of how we integrate it into the car," Varick said. "You'll never see us doing the suction-cup, cigarette lighter, sticky-pad stuff. That's not us. "We're going to do it OEM-grade, but we're going to do it clever."

Brandmotion got its start as a business unit spun off from JCI. The unit had developed an overhead rail system with empty modules for the Ford F-150 pickup truck but was unsure what to do with it, said Varick, who oversaw marketing strategy and innovation for the auto supplier.

Varick turned the raw idea into a package that gave customers the ability to customize the rails with products from companies such as Black & Decker, Swiss Army and Leatherman. The supplier eventually sold the rails to all three Detroit automakers.

Brandmotion today incubates space from the Grand Rapids headquarters of Cascade Engineering Inc., which is also a minority investor.

"We're diversifying our business and we're investing, so it's not unusual," said Samia Brown, a Cascade spokeswoman. "I think Brandmotion was just a great idea and a great business model and they're doing well in this environment in spite of the auto industry because of their technology and their approach to consumer technology integration."

Cascade provides engineering, supply chain and other help for Brandmotion, Varick said. "They have really become a serious partner and backbone to our efforts to get up and off the ground," he said, citing in particular the help of Cascade founder Fred Keller. "He loves to incubate new ventures, new ideas."

In June, Brandmotion plans to launch an aftermarket product it has developed for Pontiac-based navigation system company GuidePoint Systems. The product, which will mount to a vehicle's steering wheel column, integrates Bluetooth and GPS technology with GuidePoint's 24-hour call centers to offer emergency assistance, driving directions and concierge services.

The product is likely to retail at \$349 for a basic version and \$795 for a premium version, said Brian Edwards, vice president of GuidePoint.

"We think that the market acceptance of it is going to be pretty good," Edwards said. "Part of that is, people are pretty familiar with Bluetooth and hands-free kits..."

"It'll be easily accessible both to use and to see because it'll have a display screen with numbers that you're calling."

Varick said the work with Whirlpool, which is selling its Centralpark Connection refrigerators for about \$2,000, opened his eyes to the possibilities of connectivity.

With companies like furniture makers Steelcase and Herman Miller, Whirlpool and the automakers, Michigan dominates the home, office and car industries.

"This is a fantastic state to be in if you want to develop real estate and products for connectivity," Varick said.

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