# Beyond Basics

by Elizabeth Barnett

Positioning a company into and leading it through a second decade of growth often requires a different set of skills, talent and vision than the start-up years. BASIS President George Hight has had to make some tough decisions. But in doing so, he's firmly adhering to one of the company's founding principles, open architecture.

Poised to begin the 21st century from a position of stability and strength, BASIS has undergone almost a complete transformation over the last few years. Even President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) George Hight, when he relates the fact, seems somewhat incredulous that today of BASIS' 57 employees, only 14 remain from the time he stepped into his position. That was 1995 and BASIS was 10 years old. But the changes haven't only been in the realm of personnel; there's renewed focus in the management philosophy.

"We're absolutely committed to opening up the product line so that people can use those parts of our products that make sense for them to solve their problems," George says. "We don't want to be the *whole* solution, but we'd like to be a *part* of the solution." Although BASIS was founded in 1985 specifically to port the Business Basic language into nonproprietary environments, there still persisted a tendency to want to control developers' use of the language through hardware restrictions, he explains. "I think we're in exactly the same position today with software," he adds. "Ultimately, I believe that software needs to be able to run anywhere and that's the goal of our product line. We want to allow people who develop with our products to run their applications anywhere and to combine what they write using our products with other products to provide solutions to their customers."

While BASIS has been committed to the "write it once, run it everywhere" philosophy, just how far a company can take that stance and remain viable is a hot topic in the industry. Even the idea of open standards for software technology is controversial. Two camps are drawing lines in the sand: one side taking technology in a more proprietary direction, à la Microsoft, and one side advocating a more open, standardized approach, à la Sun Microsystems and its Java technology and Open Source software such as Linux. BASIS is aligning itself in a manner consistent with its beginnings, George says, toward open, standardized tools that allow developers to write applications that work in different kinds of hardware, operating system and networking environments. In the coming year and beyond, BASIS has a plan for giving Business Basic developers new tools that build on what's been developed so far for PRO/5® and Visual PRO/5®. Applications developers will be able to create packages that enjoy a broader user base, platform independence, reduced development costs and a consistent execution environment. They'll be able to move the knowledge stored in their legacy applications into new environments, like the Internet, with greater flexibility without having to rewrite those applications. And they'll have access to a whole new world of development possibilities while preserving the strength of the Business Basic language, specifically its business rules and the ease of writing the code.

Traditionally, it's been hard to find programmers who can combine software knowledge and the specific industry savvy necessary to create applications in the Business Basic market,
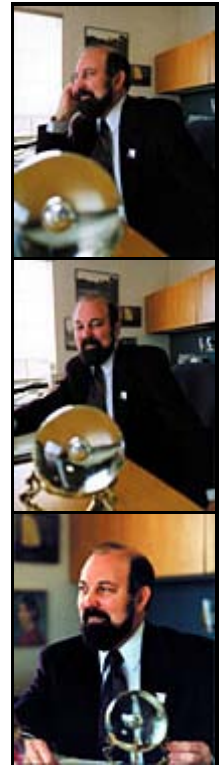
George says. With the fundamental ease of Business Basic and the flexibility of the new technologies BASIS will be incorporating, we hope to return to developers the concept that "if you know the business, you can write the application" and to not only draw our own share of new customers but rejuvenate the Business Basic software market as a whole.

"We are so lucky," George says, "because we're in a creative business. I think there's a special kind of satisfaction that comes from being involved in this kind of enterprise. There are so many opportunities; it's just a matter of deciding which ones to pursue." In the swarm of all these opportunities, concentrating on event-driven and object-oriented programming has become the focus. Making that decision, however, wasn't easy. BASIS is at once an established company, with a strong product line and customer base and no debt, and is also a newly recreated company, with new products, processes and people. It's a delicate balance between known customer needs and educated guesswork to prepare for the future of computing technology.

"We've done a lot of the right things in the last year," George says. A better ODBC driver, client/server solutions and GUIBuilder™ have all issued forth from this upheaval. George believes that the June release of a solid GUIBuilder in Visual PRO/5 was one of the best products BASIS developed in 1998. Banking on the popularity and endurance of the Microsoft Windows environment, GUIBuilder provides a clear migration path for developers to bring their legacy data into 21st century computing and the Windows environment. But aside from new products, many of the steps BASIS has taken won't be visible to customers for awhile. Customers probably won't notice the internal shifts and changes in the BASIS quality assurance processes and testing, but results are becoming apparent in the products they buy. Another change that may not be immediately apparent, George says, is the firm commitment to bringing products to market in a timely manner and on schedule, an area in which BASIS has had problems in the past.

Another catalyst for change came with the emergence of real market competition. "This was the one of the best things that ever happened to BASIS," George says. "Up until a few years ago, there really was no aggressive competition. BASIS had become complacent."

But it's not just about competition in the domestic Business Basic market. In explaining some of the philosophical shift to dealing effectively with competition, he points to a talk by Tom Peters that he and other BASIS management recently attended. "In the Year 2000 and beyond, we have to realize that we're going to be competing with 1.7 billion people who are only .6 seconds away over the Internet and who are talented, too. Our organizations are going to have to be driven on talent. And that means individuals' success is based on their keeping their talents fresh."

Having started two businesses of his own before being asked to take over the position of president at BASIS, George says that while BASIS has put all these new processes and people in place, the last year has been one of the most difficult for him personally. "The key thing to a business succeeding is the organization, the people. I had always prided myself on being able to put together good organizations. We [the management team] had to make the decision that if we were going to survive and go forward, we were going to have to refocus our resources, resources being people." He believes that he has finally rallied a group of people who are not only talented but motivated to succeed and to achieve in a way that can further BASIS along through its second decade of growth. "We all have complementary talents," George says of the current management team. "More than that, though, we all like each other and we trust each other." Trust is key, he says, internally among BASIS management and externally with customers.

"I want people to think of us as a partner, a solutions partner," George says. "And I want people to think of us as dependable and delivering quality. I want them to think of us as a partner in the sense that we understand we're just a part of their solution. We want to make their solution easier but not get in the way of it. I want them to think of us as dependable in that when they have problems, they know that BASIS is going to be there to help them. And I expect BASIS to set a new standard for quality in the industry."