

Nation's Business[®]

The Small Business Adviser

Published by U.S. Chamber of Commerce

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Award Winner's Style Is Hawaiian For 'Family'

Charles "Charlie" Fortner has come a long way since he accepted an offer from two friends to move from Ohio to Hawaii to start a paging business. So far, in fact, that he was named the 1998 Young Entrepreneur of the Year by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Fortner, 28, is founder, president, and a partner at Island Page Inc., a Honolulu-based telecommunications firm that specializes in selling, servicing, and maintaining paging equipment. The firm has grown from a one-man start-up four years ago to the point that its subscriber market share ranks it third among paging companies in the state.

Fortner himself has gone from a newly minted Ohio State University graduate with a finance degree but no management experience to leader of an innovative company with revenues of more than \$2 million a year. His 18 employees praise him for a management style that has created an *ohana*—Hawaiian for "family"—work atmosphere.

"It was all about accepting the challenge and making the challenge fun—which is what I have always done," says Fortner, whose company recently entered the cellular-telephone market and expanded its communications network from the island of Oahu to statewide.

At first it was a good thing that Fortner considers long hours of hard work to be fun. He handled everything himself—"I don't like to waste money," he explains—and found himself having to learn how to do things he had never done before.

Building the company from the ground up, he negotiated the lease for his first store, hired the contractors to build it, and bought the office furniture and paging equipment. He personally installed and tested the transmitters that carry the paging signals; once he had to set up a transmitter on the ridge of a mountain that



Sending a message, Charles Fortner fosters an *ohana*—Hawaiian for "family"—work atmosphere at his Honolulu-based telecommunications firm, Island Page Inc.

could be reached only by helicopter.

After the company opened for business in March 1995, Fortner often worked 20-hour days, programming and repairing pagers, handling inventory and customer concerns, paying the bills, and even cleaning the store.

Now that Island Page, whose profits have increased exponentially each year, has a work force appropriate for its size, Fortner can step back some from the day-to-day operations and focus more on managing the company and its employees.

Targeting a market of 18- to 34-year-olds, Fortner has stocked flashy looking pagers and used creative advertising campaigns—largely via radio—that include "Capt. Beep Beep," a character that has achieved a measure of fame on the islands.

Fortner's employees say that he's al-

ways open to new ideas and that he encourages contributions from each member of the staff. For his part, Fortner says the main thing he looks for in potential hires is honesty and the ability to fit in with the rest of the staff.

He isn't about to rest on the laurels of winning the SBA award. The company "will be more aggressive," says Fortner, who despite his quick success took a Dale Carnegie course to improve his leadership skills. "We focused on [individual retail sales] when we first came in. The big growth was in retail for the younger crowd. Now we're more focused on business, which is more stable." ■