

Buckingham's new vision

By Marc Brazil

It would be a real challenge to find a more indefatigable local entrepreneur than Jeff Buckingham, a major force behind Call America, a highly regarded San Luis Obispo based purveyor of telecommunications services. The company was subsequently acquired by GST Telecommunications, which had ambitious plans to create a network up and down the West Coast. But GST took on more than it could handle and was forced to file for bankruptcy. Most of its assets, including the former Call America network, were sold to Time Warner Telecom.

Many would have been content to take their share of proceeds from the company's sale for \$16 million, sell it and lead a very comfortable life of leisure. Not Buckingham. At a time when Wall Street investment bankers have dumped telecoms from their portfolios and the media is filled with stories about the industry's woes, Buckingham is working on a business plan for a new company to take advantage of the opportunities in the telecommunications industry.

We are entering a time when Pacific Bell and other big companies are going to lose market share, Buckingham says. It's going to happen. Buckingham says that monopolies, like Pacific Bell, react to competition by getting upset and kicking and screaming. This always creates opportunity for small, customer service driven companies. Buckingham theorizes that the run-up of telecom stocks in recent years was driven by financial guys. Companies would go to a banker hoping to borrow \$100 million only to have the banker say, why not \$500 million? Obviously this led to major problems.

You are going to see lots of start-up telecoms in the next few years, predicts Buckingham. There is going to be a move to bite size companies and less insanity. I have been waiting for the window to open. This is a great time to enter the telecom business, with the big companies fumbling around.

With so much going on Buckingham is convinced that there is a need for a local company to help people. Buckingham's vision for this new company is based on the Call America model, which he says, was a grand experiment. Like Call America, Buckingham's new adventure will be built around respect and appreciation for its customers, to create a culture where going the extra mile for a customer was fun. The company will also be infused with a belief in community service, as was Call America. We recognized that our customers valued the community and so we were involved and encouraged our employees to be a part of community organizations, says Buckingham. Buckingham's philosophy isn't entirely altruistic, noting that if the numbers don't work, you don't get to play the game. You have to learn to run at a profit or the whole equation falls apart.

Buckingham is talking to local investors about his plan for a company to provide exceptional service and technical support to customers along the central coast. The goal is to build a company that can provide the whole solution to its customers, something that is lacking now, Buckingham says.