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Programmed for profit

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ISO/MLS benefits:

- Choice of three compensation plans
- In-house customer, technical and sales support
- Proposal teams with four-hour response times
- Assistance with large presentations
- Start-up income for agent offices

Before discovering the payments industry, Justin Milmeister, founder and President of Elite Data Processing Inc. (doing business as Elite Merchant Solutions), was a commercial real estate broker. "One day I was speaking with a retailer at one of the shopping centers that I was looking to lease, and he was complaining about how his terminal was not working for five days, and he could not get in touch with anybody to get it working," Milmeister said.

Milmeister contacted a friend in the payments industry who signed and set up the merchant the next day. He didn't know much about his friend's business. But with his curiosity piqued, he learned about the earning potential for professionals in the payments industry. "All I heard was residual, and I immediately began to do my research on merchant services," Milmeister said.

Following six months of earnest investigation, Milmeister took the plunge. He left real estate behind and started EMS in January 2002. In addition to processing credit, debit and automated clearing house transactions, EMS offers check guarantee, [Check 21](#) and [remote deposit capture](#) solutions. EMS also sells ATMs, payment terminals, a gift card program, payment processing software and merchant cash advance.

More pennies

It is common knowledge that competition is fierce in this industry, and the glory days of equipment sales have passed. Merchant level salespeople (MLs) are competing with each other for the same merchants, often offering merchants lower processing rates to switch. The EMS philosophy is to go extremely low to decrease chances of being undercut.

"We'd rather price someone ... as low and as aggressively as we possibly can," said Jeff Brodsky, Director of Operations for EMS. "We'd rather make pennies for years versus dollars for days. We make a little bit of money, but we build a long-term relationship with this merchant, knowing that they're going to stay with us for years. And over those years, the pennies add up."

One aspect of ensuring those stable relationships is choosing merchants who will still be in business a year from now, merchants who demonstrate healthy, existing credit card volume.

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"We see too many of our competitors spinning their wheels, signing new businesses [that are] out of business in three months," Milmeister said.

EMS focuses on such vertical markets as restaurants, hotels and auto dealerships. The company trains its sales partners to seek high-volume merchants. In this way, EMS can recover on the low rate with volume.

Red-carpet treatment

EMS endeavors to always hold up its end of its client relationships. "We really take customer service seriously," Milmeister said. EMS keeps in contact with its merchants via birthday and holiday cards and regular quality assurance visits. Milmeister added that EMS only partners with MLSs who it thinks will perpetuate EMS' philosophy of showing care and support to merchants. "I love when I go to a high-end department store and am greeted by my name, asked how my day is going, get pampered and treated with respect," Brodsky said. "As I leave there, I have this feeling of importance that is irreplaceable. We strive to provide this feeling to each and every one of our merchants." As his guiding principal, Paul Rasidakis, National Sales Director for EMS, gives every merchant, large or small, the same red-carpet treatment. "Everyone will be treated with the same sense of urgency," he said.

Honors received

As evidence that EMS has found a formula that works, the company was named to the 2009 [Inc. magazine's](#) Inc. 500 list of fastest growing U.S. companies; it was also named one of the top 100 companies in the 2009 [Nilson Report](#) that rates U.S. companies on their performance. Brodsky anticipates that EMS' rankings will improve this year as its growth continues.

"Not only are we surviving, we are growing in this economy at a faster pace than ever," Milmeister noted.

In addition, when Chase Paymentech Solutions LLC started its new ISO program in 2009, Milmeister said EMS was one of the first companies invited to participate.

EMS recognizes the importance of partnerships and the necessity of giving back to the community. "Obviously we're in this to make money; this is our career and our job, but we're also in it to help the community and to show that we're not your standard, everyday processor," Milmeister said.

With its Give Back program, EMS partners with schools, communities and chambers of commerce for mutual endorsements. The company shares a percentage of the resulting referral revenue with the referring organizations. "We are constantly putting money back into the community through programs like this and the sponsoring of events for charity or nonprofit," Brodsky said.

Sales support

For MLSs, having ISO support is crucial. EMS offers a number of programs to empower its feet on the street, help them procure new business and hang on to existing merchant clients. The programs include:

- **Win-Win:** To help agents persuade business owners of its superior rates and service, EMS offers the Win-Win program. The company is so confident it can meet or beat a prospect's current rate, it gives a trip for two to the domestic destination of the merchant's choice if it does not convince the merchant to choose EMS.
- **Agent/Partner:** EMS has a team devoted to gaining referral partnerships with chambers of commerce, financial institutions and software providers. Members of this

dedicated team travel to agent locations to help with presentations to these organizations.

- EMS Agent Stimulus: This program is for MLSs who have demonstrated the potential to establish their own ISOs but lack the means to make the move. EMS will set these candidates up with sales offices.

Milmeister gave an example of the Agent/Partner program in action. Recently two partner relations team members helped an agent close a deal with a large regional association. The group's national representative was in attendance, and EMS was able to gain the national association's partnership as well. In addition, EMS' partner relations team recently landed a deal with a software business solution provider. The provider did not have a payment component among its solutions. EMS worked with the software company to add a payment module that is proprietary to EMS. All users, present and future, of the new module are obliged to process credit card transactions through EMS.

EMS also offers quarterly and annual sales contests and several recreational events per year to enable sales agents to interact with their peers outside of the office. One such event is its annual conference in Las Vegas during which sales partners have the opportunity to provide management with feedback. "We believe strongly in feedback and invite our partners to let us know if there is an inefficiency or somewhere we can improve," Milmeister said.

The feedback isn't confined to the negative. "Many of our partners have worked with several other merchant service providers in the past, and the feedback I get time in and time out is they finally feel comfortable with a company that provides not only the most competitive compensation package and pricing, but unparalleled service," Milmeister added.

EMS allows agents to choose their own rate scheme, according to Milmeister. In this way, the agents can offer the scheme that the merchant is most comfortable with. EMS offers three compensation plans but will tailor a plan according to the needs of the MLS. "Some MLSs may be in a bind ... for the next six months, and they need more compensation weighted up front, whereas after six months, they may want to be heavy on building their residual," Milmeister noted.

In addition, EMS provides all of the technical, customer and back-end support; proposals; software downloads; and day-to-day operations. EMS likes its MLSs to be the first point of contact with merchants and to resolve the smaller issues. When a given merchant's problem is more complex, EMS is there with customer and technical support. The company offers support in Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Hebrew, Farsi, Armenian and Viet-nameese, and plans to add support in more languages.

First impressions

According to Scott King, Regional Business Director for First Data Corp., EMS has been a "valued client," using First Data's bankcard authorization, capture and settlement system for eight years. "We have seen Elite Merchant Solutions grow from a one-person operation in 2002 to an organization with multiple offices throughout the country and a top First Data ISO," King said. "Elite has a very low merchant attrition rate, which is a testament to their strong customer service - a key component of their operation."

Treating merchants and agents like family "is how we keep our operation from becoming a revolving door and our merchant attrition rate below 1 percent," Brodsky said. And not just any MLS is invited into the fold. "We know that each sales rep is a direct reflection of our company," Brodsky said.

"Therefore, we are very careful whom we hire and allow to use our name. We would rather have 10 quality sales reps than 50 or so reps that could possibly tarnish our name or not extend the service that we work so hard to provide to our merchants."

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