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Product mix keeps Troy firm ticking

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The gleaming, monstrous microscope looks like something Darth Vader might use to fight off the galactic resistance. And it's a long way from Adam Kollin's efforts to wire up his deaf grandmother's house.

But that wiring system launched Kollin's business, which now produces amazingly complicated scanning tunneling microscopes -- priced at about \$500,000 each -- for researchers all over the world.

His business, RHK Technology of Troy, still uses the theories behind the alert system he devised as a teen in its alarm clocks and other devices -- at the same time his scientists are developing state-of-the-art microscopic equipment.

"These microscopes are really for people trying to figure what are the laws of nature," said Kollin, 53. Kollin's business is in a nondescript building. It has a mom-and-pop feel that seems to contrast with his highly educated staff that includes about a half-dozen physicists.

His product mix follows that mismatched model -- Kollin sells alarm clocks branded Sonic Bomb that feature 113-decibel alarms and vibrating discs that shake the bed as well as the high-tech, atomic microscopes used by universities and government laboratories for nanotechnology.

As a teenager growing up in Rochester, Kollin wanted to help his grandmother, who couldn't hear someone knocking at the door or the phone ringing. He was a ham radio operator, so he knew a bit about electronics.

He set up a flashing light that let his grandmother know to check the phone or the door.

He patented his system, Sonic Alert, in his 20s, then made a big sale to Radio Shack when he talked to an executive who happened to have a deaf relative. He saved up money to start the business. "The money made from Sonic Alert funded the development of the microscopes," said Kollin, as he pointed out the features of a microscope for the University of Alberta. In 2008, Kollin said his company -- both microscopes and Sonic Alert devices and clocks -- generated about \$10 million in annual sales, a 40% increase over 2007.

His company sells about 100,000 clocks per year, priced around \$40 each. It sells about 10 microscopes a year.

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