

Putting a face -- and a fingerprint -- to a name

November 14 2011, By Cheryl Hall

Bill Conner runs a defense company whose customers are threatened by new forms of global attack every day.

The 52-year-old president and chief executive of Dallas-based Entrust Inc. sells software and technology to such marquee customers as [Citibank](#), Interpol and the governments of the U.S., Canada, Britain and the Middle East in their battle against cybercrime, identity theft and terrorism.

When a U.S. passport is electronically read at an airport, Entrust's embedded encryption assures immigration officials that the document is the real deal.

"We put a [digital signature](#) into the chip or the magnetic strip," Conner said in his Dallas headquarters office. "We encrypt and digitally sign all of the personal information that you provide so that it can't be tampered with."

The same is true for more than half of the passports issued by governments around the world.

Passports in six European countries and Malaysia have added biometric photos and fingerprints embedded by Entrust to foil counterfeiters. [Saudi Arabia](#), Qatar and the [United Arab Emirates](#) use its encryption for their national identity cards, some with biometrics.

But the piece de resistance is an all-in-one smart card developed for Interpol so that its [law enforcers](#) can move seamlessly from one country to the next, get inside any of its worldwide facilities and securely hook up at even the most insecure public Internet kiosk or cafe.

They're the size of a credit card and cost about \$10 apiece.

For Conner, a guy who loves technology, turning around failing businesses, James Bond movies and spy novels, this is his dream job.

This year, Entrust will post revenue in excess of \$100 million with a return of about 27 percent of its sales.

A significant portion of its business is software. Citigroup uses Entrust software to secure its desktops and email so that information flowing through its system is only accessed by authorized people.

About 20 percent of Entrust's profit is reinvested into developing products because every day brings a new type of attack.

"I love the fact that the landscape changes every day," Conner said. "One day it's the Ukrainians trying to break us. The next, it's the Iranians or some group in China or Russia. The key thing here is you've got to feed the beast. You've got to do the R&D."

When Conner took over as CEO in 2001, Entrust was losing \$25 million a quarter.

By 2009, the spin-off from Nortel Networks Corp. was performing well enough for Conner to entice Thoma Bravo LLC to buy Entrust and take it private.

Scott Crabill, managing partner of Thoma Bravo in San Francisco, said

it's been one of the private equity firm's best investments. "The management team continues to outperform the goals we set for them - even amidst an economic climate of such uncertainty."

Conner stands a chance at becoming a wealthy man if Entrust gets bought out for big bucks. He owns 5 percent of the company. But he's already made plenty of money in the technology industry, earning about a million bucks a year at Nortel Networks before moving to Entrust.

Growing up in Arkansas, Conner was a whiz at math and science but also loved the outdoors, hiking and fishing. Still does.

As a student at Princeton University, he headed the undergraduate engineering lab on alternative energy research. "That's how I put myself through school," he said. "I came from a family that was not of means where Princeton would be an option."

After he graduated in 1981, AT&T Corp. recruited him for its high-potential program where those selected either ignited or quickly flamed out. Before he turned 30, Conner was running AT&T's \$6 billion business services division.

In 1992, he joined Nortel in Washington, D.C., and rose to become president of its enterprise business headquartered in Dallas.

When Nortel spun off Entrust in 1994, Conner joined its board. He left Nortel and took over as CEO in 2001 to stop the massive hemorrhaging.

He cut the workforce from more than 1,300 to about 350 and refocused the business into an R&D machine. Even his MBA from Wharton hadn't prepared him for that.

"They didn't offer one class about how do you cut enough of your

business out to make a buck, transform your software every 18 months and keep your people happy," he said. "That's been the journey."

The journey has taken him to some pretty heady places.

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Conner spoke to a joint session of Congress about cybersecurity and terrorism. The following June, he stood before NATO in Norfolk, Va. His talk: "You've learned to fight on air, land and sea. The next front will be in cyber."

Even Interpol had to be convinced of its vulnerability.

"The secretary general had his doubts about whether Interpol needed high-security cards," Conner said, referring to his first encounters two years ago with Interpol chief Ron Noble. "So my guy took a suitcase in, cloned all their cards and walked through the facility in 30 minutes. Then we said, 'We'll show you how you can fix that.' "

Noble took Entrust up on its offer.

In October 2010, Conner presented plans to Interpol's general assembly at Doha, Qatar, where its 189 member countries approved the smart card plan.

But Conner focused his mission during an earlier meeting at Interpol headquarters in Lyon, France.

"The guy who got up after me was the head of police for Dubai, where they'd just had the Hamas assassination. I've got on my little headphones and realize I'm not at a technology conference because he's giving a case study of the murder - video, dead guy in bed, everything."

The hit team had traveled to Dubai on forged passports and had gotten

into the room with a knocked-off hotel key.

"That's when you realize this is serious stuff that we're trying to do," Conner said.

Noble said he enjoys working with Conner.

"A charismatic and dynamic individual, Bill is invested in the company and how they can help safeguard identities in a quickly evolving digital landscape," Nobel said in an email. Their partnership resulted in "a multipurpose [smart card](#) credential that should serve as the blueprint for identity-based security strategies across the globe."

Another important customer is the British government, which uses Entrust for passports and to prevent security breaches and cyber theft from government financial accounts.

"It's the first government globally to admit they're getting hacked and having government money stolen," Conner said.

Sir Nigel Sheinwald, British ambassador to the United States, says his government's collaboration with Conner and Entrust "has brought about innovative security initiatives that enhance the protection of British citizens."

Last week, Entrust landed its largest fraud detection contract ever, although Conner can't reveal who it's with.

"We went through this big technology bake-off in the last 18 months, and we just won the award," he said.

Clearly, Conner has a fan base across the pond.

Andrew Pinder, former e-Envoy to Prime Minister Tony Blair and that administration's chief information officer, was Conner's main contact in the early stages of Entrust's collaboration with the Brits.

"Bill's always shown enormous drive, vision and innovation in leading Entrust through shifts in the digital world where other technology and security organizations have failed or lagged seriously behind," said Pinder, an independent consultant in London.

"This understanding and anticipation of changes ahead, coupled with smart business acumen and a very acute political antenna, are why Bill is greatly respected among his peers and clients."

ENTRUST INC.

-Headquarters: Dallas

-Ownership: Spun off from Nortel Networks in 1994, IPO in 1998, bought by private equity firm Thoma Bravo in July 2009

-2011 revenue: In excess of \$100 million

-Return on sales: 27 percent

-Employees: 350 in 12 offices globally; about a third of the employees have security clearance for the governments they work with.

-Customers: 4,000 in more than 60 countries. The smallest generates \$10,000 in yearly sales, and the largest annual government contract is \$10 million.

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