

## Let me tell you a story,”

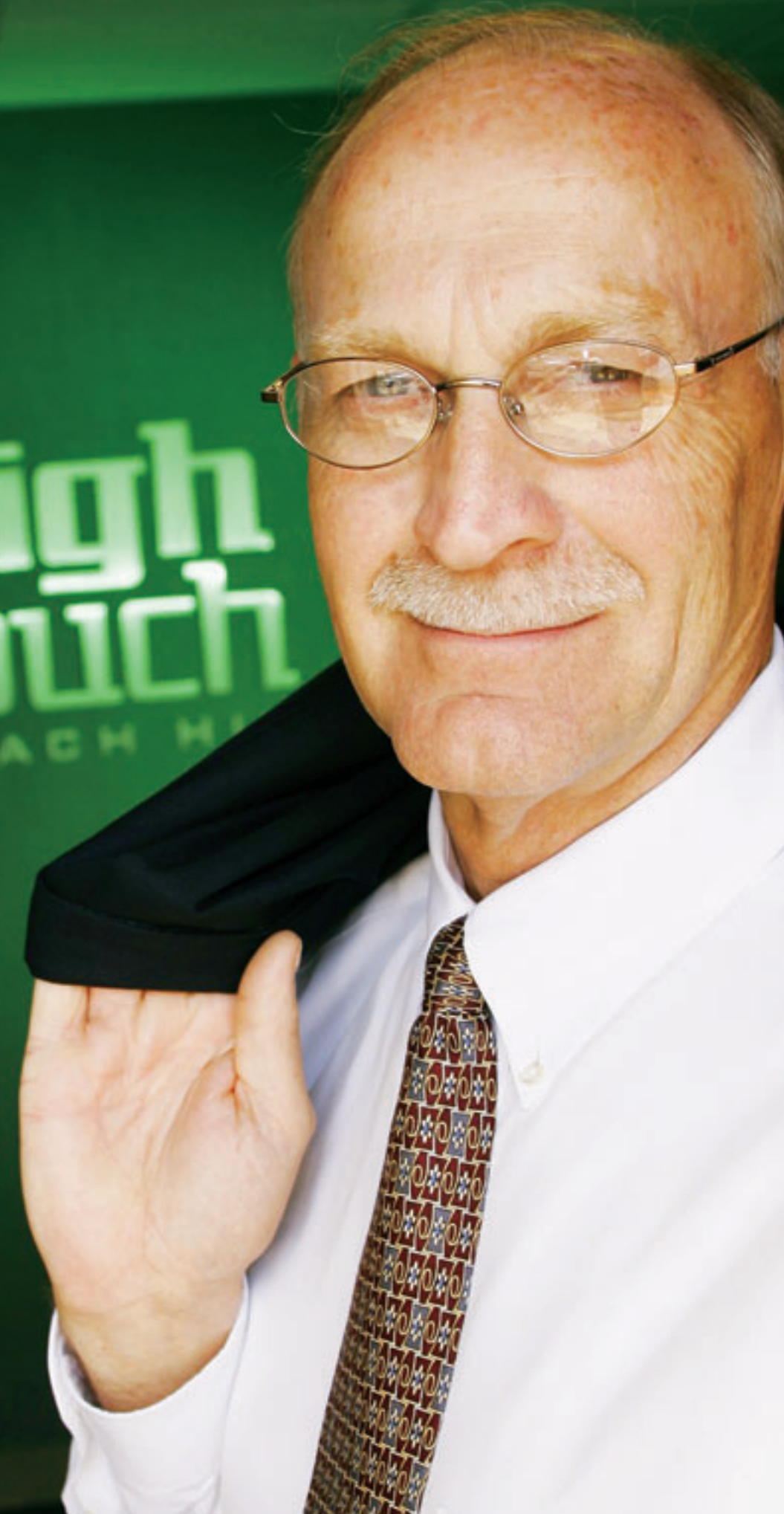
begins Wayne Chambers, with a tone of discretion. “In 1976, my wife, Susan, and I packed everything—and I mean *everything*—we owned in a 5x10 trailer, and along with our small daughter and her dog in a pickup pulling the trailer, we all went to Houston on a wing and prayer. For two kids from Kansas, it was quite a dramatic change; in fact, when I interviewed for the Houston job, it was our first time ever to fly on a plane. Since then, we’ve traveled to five continents and visited almost every major city in the U.S., including Alaska. And now, after 30 years, we’ve been able to come home. ♣ For 57-year-old Chambers, the newly tapped president of rent-to-own software leader High Touch Inc. ([www.hightouch-inc.com](http://www.hightouch-inc.com)), his literal hometown is Wichita, Kansas, where he grew up. But in accepting his presidential position from High Touch, Chambers agreed to more than just moving back to the familiar heart of the Midwest; he also agreed to return to his rent-to-own roots. And he plans to make sure this story has the happiest of endings.

# You can go home again

**An APROFILE by KRISTEN CARD**

**PHOTOGRAPHS by DESIGNWOERKS and BILL KEESE**

**AFTER 30 YEARS  
AWAY, HIGH TOUCH'S  
NEW PRESIDENT  
WAYNE CHAMBERS  
HAS RETURNED—  
TO KANSAS AND TO  
RENT-TO-OWN**



**B**orn on a farm just east of Wichita, Wayne Chambers' family moved to the city by the time he was ready for school. Chambers spent all of his schooling years in Wichita, eventually graduating—twice—from Wichita State University; first, with his bachelor's degree in business administration, with an emphasis on business and accounting; and then, with his master's of science in accounting, with an emphasis on economics and finance. 🌱 That's when Chambers was offered the opportunity to go to work for Remco Inc., a privately held rent-to-own company headquartered in Houston, in its accounting and finance department. He accepted and made the 600-plus-mile move with his wife, child, dog, pickup and 5x10 trailer. It paid off; Chambers stayed with Remco for 10 years, then owned his own stores—spread across several states, including Ohio, Kentucky and Oklahoma—as a Remco franchisee, from the early 1980s until 1995, when he and his partners decided to sell.

Chambers went on to a succession of jobs with rent-to-own companies that eventually sold to other rental companies. He went to work at Amigo TV Rental Inc., in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which sold to RTO Inc. RTO later changed its name again to HomeChoice Holdings, and Chambers moved to Dallas to work for HomeChoice. But when HomeChoice sold to RentWay, Chambers moved from RTO to payday loans, going to work for Advance America Cash Advance Centers in South Carolina. And that's where he was when he got the call from High Touch.

Chambers joined and began transitioning into his new

**“The rent-to-own industry is an alternative, pure and simple. And I'm a true believer in allowing that alternative to live and to exist. I'm a fierce supporter of it.”**

position at High Touch last October, while his predecessor, Lyle Jones, began his transition out of the company and into retirement. Jones officially left High Touch at the close of 2005, ending a 15-year stint as leader of the 22-year-old company.

“Lyle gave me 15 years of historical perspective,” Chambers says about their cross-over time. “He provided me with insight on internal personalities and outstanding client issues. Essentially, he provided me with an understanding of the underpinnings of the business, and that gave me a faster, smoother start.”

**O**ne of Chambers' first decisions was to spend about 90 days on the road, talking with clients, industry colleagues and employees.

“I met with clients and vendors, traveled to trade shows, went to association functions and events,” recounts Chambers. “My purpose was to learn, to hear what was happening in the industry; I had to refresh myself. And from our clients, I wanted to know what they thought was good, bad and otherwise, and get a sense of what all that might mean for High Touch going forward.”

The “good” that Chambers found—some of the company's greatest strengths—involves the solid foundation that High Touch and its products are built upon.

“High Touch is about 70 percent employee-owned, and that promotes employee longevity,” Chambers says. “I think our stability and the structure of our business model mean we're going to be around for a long, long time.”

“Secondly, it creates a detailed working knowledge of our programs, systems, hardware and a continuing personal relationship with our clients,” he says. “The approach High Touch took many years ago in developing software was very analytical. The company founders developed a system that's very functional. So what you get is not all the bells and whistles you might see with somebody else's product; what you do get is when you go to the store every morning and punch your computer to turn it

on so you can operate your store, it comes up just as regular as the sun. A lot of reliability, a lot of redundancy, a lot of practicality—that's worth a lot in my book, when it comes to operating a store.”

Chambers refers to High Touch's key seller, PRO/Systems, a comprehensive software system designed especially for the rent-to-own industry. PRO/Systems is a point-of-sale system that simplifies and tracks the receipt and rental of inventory, payment transactions, rental agreements, customer information and collections. The system compiles all data, produces relevant statistics and lets the store print daily reports. PRO/Systems also includes completely integrated home office capabilities, connecting home offices and stores via high-speed Internet, so that information is entered into the system only once.

Integrated PRO/Accounting software helps clients easily perform all of their accounting functions—paying payroll and bills, compiling and calculating financial and profit/loss statements, etc.—also with no re-entering of data. High Touch also offers FUND\$, software designed for payday loans/check cashing businesses, and, through its RSSS division, tire-and-wheel rental software and Maestro Music Business Software for retail and rental music businesses.

Chambers is ready to begin building on High Touch's solid foundation, with both horizontal and vertical growth. While software has brought it successfully thus far, Chambers wants to enhance High Touch's offerings in online and security services and video surveillance solutions.

“There's opportunity out there to generate more market share,” insists Chambers, “and I believe there's just as much opportunity or more to create market share in other industries, working with the clients we already have.”

“What I'm trying to impress upon our clients and our employees is that we're not just a software company,” Chambers continues. “We're a business solutions provider.”

And what that means is, our job is not just providing clients with software; our job is to provide them with the best technology and services to meet their needs, every day.”

The not-as-good that Chambers found during his travels—some of the company's challenges—involve improving High Touch's communications, evaluating the architecture of the company's software system, and possibly re-examining its pricing model.

But the one facet of the business Chambers seems intensely focused on is speeding up the delivery of new products into the marketplace.

“We've got a backlog of enhancements and customer requests,” notes Chambers. “I think there are things we can do to improve our ability to address customer requests.”

“In today's world, I think it's speed that makes the difference between a company winning and losing,” he says. “If you're small, but you're nimble, innovative and very progressive, then I think you can do well, from a business point of view. It's not the big that eat the small; it's the fast that eat the slow.”

That maxim, which Chambers dubs his “unofficial



**High Touch and RSSS team members at TRIB Group's recent show: Doug Funk, Wayne Chambers, Ellison Crider and John Rogers.**

motto,” leads into another story—a simplified version, Chambers assures; the setting is the Serengeti:

“When the gazelle wakes up in the morning, he knows he must run faster than the lion or he won't survive—he'll be eaten. When the lion wakes up in the morning, he knows he must run faster than the gazelle, or he won't survive, he'll starve. So what's the moral? When you get up in the morning, you better be runnin'.”

Chambers chuckles, but it's clear he passionately believes in this need for speed and quality in today's business environment. He intends to apply that concept at High Touch, even as he continues to climb a learning curve of his own.

“I'm still learning,” confesses Chambers. “I'm learning a



lot about information technology, which I'm no expert at, but I bring other things to the table. I've got good people all around me who know quite a bit about the technological side, but who may not be as knowledgeable about the business side. I need to get a little bit higher up the curve in terms of technology and help them get a little bit higher on the curve when it comes to the pure business aspects.

"There's still a lot for me to learn, and there's still a lot for us to do, and I think we've got the tools to do it with," Chambers concludes optimistically. "Things are going good and I'm having fun—that's the important thing."

**T**he pun is almost too easy—the guy who's all about speed is driven, ha ha. But for Wayne Chambers, it happens to be the truth. Even a conversation with Chambers feels like it's on a trajectory; his pace isn't racing or erratic like a too-much-coffee man, but there's little room for pauses here; not many "uhhhs" or "umms" can creep in.

Hemming and hawing simply aren't part of Chambers' world. Driven toward solutions and forward movement, he prefers to tackle problems head-on.

"I believe there's no problem without a solution," says Chambers. "I've got my opinions, but I'm fairly flexible. I try to take the time to listen, learn and figure out how I can best fit myself in the situation to help bring about a solution. I'm very tenacious—not ambitious, necessarily, but

tenacious. And I think if you're not willing to offer a solution, then don't offer the problem. You don't have the right to complain if you're unwilling to get in there and do something to make a difference."

This philosophy is likely what spurred Chambers into what turned out to be the fight of his career—and the future of the rent-to-own industry. In the mid-1980s, the Internal Revenue Service began challenging RTO on two specific tax issues, with gigantic implications: whether rent-to-own products are depreciable; and whether RTO should characterize its transactions as sales, as opposed to lease or rental. A few rent-to-own companies were audited and were challenged by the IRS on those issues.

"If they lost, then it would literally put them out of business," Chambers remembers. Several of us decided, "We've got to do something about this. It's not the right thing, that's not what we believe. And we definitely don't want to see our brethren put out of business, because eventually, the whole industry will be out of business."

Through the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations, Chambers helped create a Tax and Accounting Committee, which he chaired, and they began to raise awareness of and interest in the issue among rental dealers and vendors.

"We formulated a plan, raised money to fund the plan, researched experts in the field—attorneys, accountants and the like—and retained the best we could find," says Chambers. "Then we spent about 10 years doggedly work-

ing our side of the fence, against [industry] opponents and the IRS."

As one might expect, going up against the IRS is an overwhelmingly consuming task, and for a decade—during which he served two terms as APRO president—Chambers essentially turned his professional life over to this fight. It is, he concedes, the real reason he ended up selling his rent-to-own business.

The turning point came during the early '90s, when two U.S. circuit courts ruled in opposite directions on the issue. Chambers and his team went to Congressional lawmakers and requested their help in clearing up the contradiction.

"I can remember the morning—it was March of 1993," Chamber says. "I got a phone call from our attorneys saying the IRS had capitulated on the sale-versus-lease issue. Two years later, the IRS added depreciation rules to the actual Tax Code, so we could depreciate our property. That ultimately offered us safe haven on both issues. It was tremendous; it was a billion-dollar win for the industry and the highlight of my entire career."

APRO Executive Director Bill Keese says the value of what Chambers sacrificed in order to ensure the continued success of RTO is immeasurable. "Wayne has given more to this industry than anyone I can think of," says Keese, "and we are all immensely grateful to him."

**A**nd Wayne Chambers is grateful to be home again. He and his wife of 30 years, Susan, both still have siblings around Wichita, as well as two of their four grown daughters and seven of their nine grandchildren. They also own some acreage east of Wichita, which, after 30 years on the road, is where Chambers prefers to spend his downtime.

"I return to my roots every weekend," he says. "I enjoy the outdoors, but the urge to travel has passed. I just go out to the farm and I go work cattle or sit on a tractor all day long. It takes me back."

As for coming back to the rent-to-own fold, Chambers couldn't be more pleased about it. His years away from the industry don't seem to have tempered his passion for it at all.

"I am a true believer," says Chambers. "I truly believe we offer a possible solution that otherwise our customers might not have. The American Dream is based on material wealth. Capitalism is a beautiful thing. Unfortunately, some people at the lower end of the capitalism spectrum get left behind. RTO gives them a chance to own that big screen, refrigerator or whatever. We're an alternative, pure and simple. And I'm a true believer in allowing that alternative to live and to exist. I'm a fierce supporter of it."

"My response to criticism about our industry is, 'We provide a service, take a risk no one else is willing to take. If you want to take the risk or do something different to meet the needs of those tens of hundreds of thousands of people, then get after it. I'm out there doing it.'" ■

*Kristen Card is an independent business writer in Austin, Texas.*

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