

# T Keeping up with Jones

**High Touch president Lyle Jones speaks out on his career, his company and his future in a camper**

**An APROfile by  
Kristen Card**

Lyle Jones has been thinking a lot about his professional legacy lately. With retirement beckoning from just around the corner, 62-year-old Jones—president of rent-to-own software leader High Touch ([www.hightouchinc.com](http://www.hightouchinc.com)) for the past 15 years—is quite realistic about the transition he’s about to undertake, from over-scheduled executive to too-much-time-on-his-hands retiree. | But this Kansas native is all about dealing with what’s real. His down-to-earth upbringing shows through with every observation, even as he muses about something as tenuous as his enduring influence on his industry, his company and his colleagues.

GAVIN PETERS



# G

oogle “Dighton, Kansas,” and the most interesting information the search engine will produce are early 20th-century photographs of threshing and harvesting crews and equipment, prominently displayed grain elevators and a cookshack wagon next to a wheat field. Dighton, a western Kansas town of only about 1,300 and the Lane County seat, is also Lyle Jones’ hometown.

Jones’ father was Dighton’s city manager, not a farmer or a shop owner with a family business to hand down. Early on, Lyle realized in order to make a living for himself, he had to get out of Dighton. So he went to college at Kansas State University.

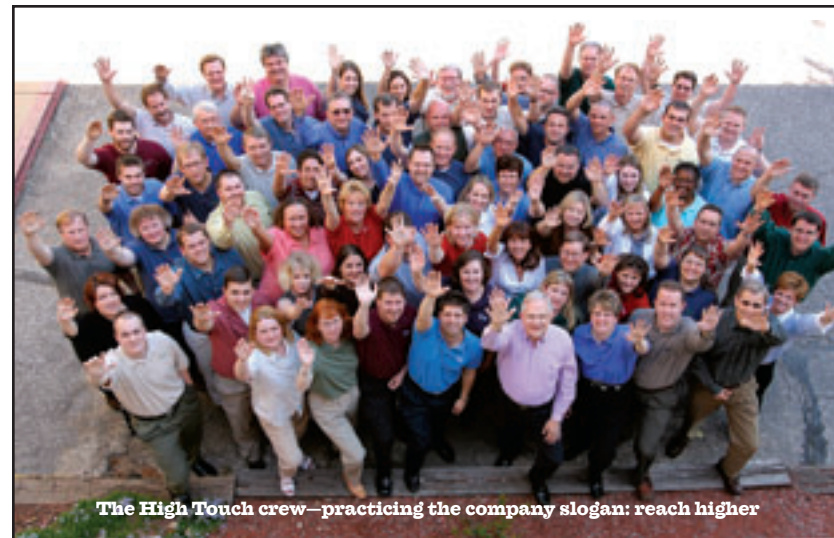
“I left Dighton thinking I was going to be an electrical engineer,” remembers Jones. But like most students at college, Jones began to rethink his major once he started classes. He didn’t really like electrical engineering, but genuinely enjoyed math. Knowing one of the ways into the then-fledgling computer industry was with a mathematics degree, Jones pursued such a degree and graduated with it in 1965.

Jones’ first job was with Boeing, Wichita’s largest manufacturer. There, he worked on several projects, including a missile-testing program in New Mexico, about which Jones jokes that he’d have to kill you if he told you more. After five years, Jones left Boeing to serve as the dean of students and director of public affairs at Kansas Technical Institute (today’s Kansas State at Salina), a two-year engineering and science technology school in the north central part of the state. But the lure of Boeing proved too strong, and just three years later, he returned to the company as a software development manager on an immense flight simulator project. At the same time, Jones began working toward his MBA, which he received in 1978, and with newly improved credentials, he decided to leave Boeing a second time and go into private business.

“I began looking for a job, and I went to a small company developing software for motels, hotels and condominiums,” Jones recalls. “They did everything from reservations to check-in and check-out procedures. I spent almost 10 years there; I went in as a general manager, and came out as the chief operating offi-

cer. Business wasn’t good, sales were struggling and we needed one less VP on a day when I was sort of on the wrong side of the president. And I got fired; I was terminated.”

No doubt suffering from pink-slip shock and seeking familiarity, Jones



GROUP: JIM CERTLE; JONES: DAVID DUNNELL

returned once again to Boeing. Around the same time, a mutual friend introduced Jones to Ted Cary, the founding president of High Touch Inc. A year later, when Cary decided to move on from High Touch, he picked up the phone to tap his potential successor.

“I got a call from Ted, saying he was leaving High Touch and if I was interested in his job, then I’d better get a résumé out there,” recounts Jones. “I did—and I got the job.”

**W**hen Lyle Jones accepted leadership of High Touch in the spring of 1990, the company was six years old and had 10 employees. Just a few more than 350 rent-to-own stores used its software. High Touch hadn’t had a salesperson for about four years, so hir-

ing the right one became Jones’ first order of business—and go-getter Sherry Workman filled the bill perfectly.

“She went out, she sold the market and we grew quite rapidly,” Jones says. “By fall of ’92, we’d grown our customer base to 500 stores. Then when we got the Rent-A-Center account in 1998, it caused huge growth for us. Today, we’ve got 90 people in the Wichita offices, we bought our largest competitor about three years ago and about 4,200 rent-to-own stores are using our products, which is about 50 percent of the market.”

The former competitor, RSSS, is now a High Touch di-

vision based out of Corpus Christi, Texas, specializing in rent-to-rent and retail software. RSSS also offers Maestro Music Business Software for retail and rental music businesses, a growth market for the division.

But having gobbled up the next biggest fish doesn’t mean High Touch lacks competition. Jones says Ideal Software Systems, Rental Information Systems and RTO Plus still hold about 1,700 stores not affiliated with Aaron’s or Rent-Way—and they are the company’s targets for growth.

“We see the possibility of growing our services and products probably two percent to five percent over the next five years,” forecasts Jones. “We’ve got Rent-A-Center, and they’re a wonderful client; as they grow, they’ve stretched

our product, stretched our business and made us better. But we’re also trying to diversify into the payday loans/check cashing industry, so we don’t have all our eggs in one basket.”

Nevertheless, High Touch’s key seller remains PRO/Store, a comprehensive software system designed especially for the rental-purchase industry. PRO/Store is a point-of-sale system that simplifies and tracks the receipt and rental of

ware helps store locations easily perform all of their accounting functions—paying payroll and bills, compiling and calculating financial and profit/loss statements, etc.—according to home-office mandates. The company also offers FUNDS\$, software designed for payday loans/check cashing businesses, as well as Web site development services.

Yet, while Jones thinks High Touch’s software offerings are exceptional, he

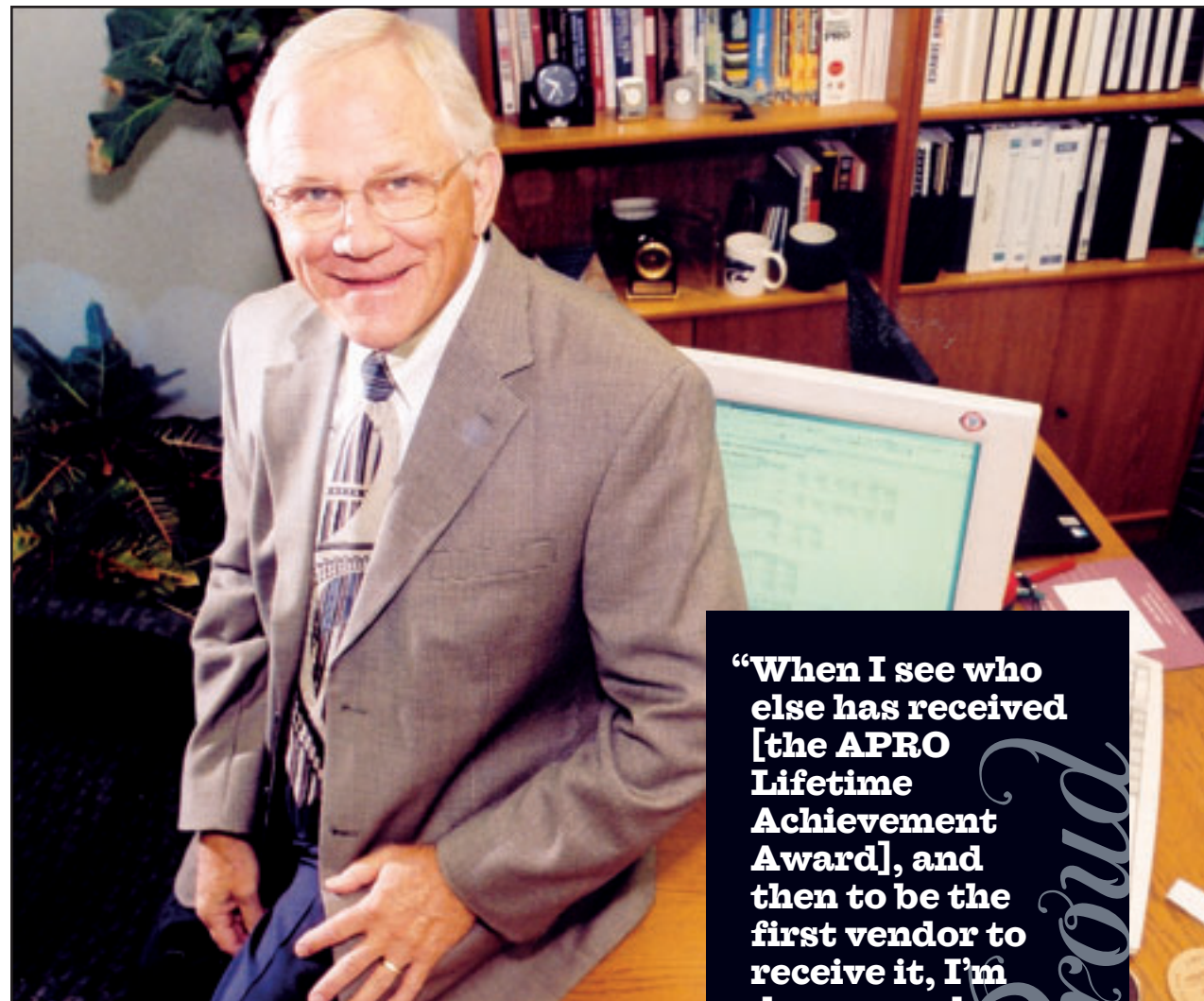
feels the company’s competitive advantage isn’t all about the product.

“I coined a phrase once I’d been here about a year, and I firmly believe it,” Jones states unequivocally. “We’re first and foremost a service company and we also have software products to sell. What it means is, if it comes down to it, we maintain our customers rather than spending time and energy on development [of new features or products]. We feel our resources should be dedicated to our existing client base and our service and support are second to none. We have less than a three-minute hold time for our calls. If the client leaves a message, then 90 percent of the time we return his/her call in less than an hour and most of those problems are solved within 15 minutes. We don’t go home with people not fixed.”

**T**he hitch in pledging that your company will provide extraordinary service is that you need people working for you who are as committed as you are to providing it. This is where Jones’ pragmatic approach proves particularly beneficial. Plain and simple, High Touch is too big for one man to oversee all operations, so Jones puts the responsibility and his faith squarely upon the shoulders of his management team—and they deliver.

“I’m not an innovator; I’m more of a facilitator,” says Jones. “I’m an extremely team-oriented manager. I’m surrounded by a management team that learned a long time ago that I don’t want ‘yes men;’ I want open dialogue. And if I have to make decisions, I do, but I’d rather have all of us involved in the big decisions. I’m a fairly hands-off manager. I just believe in the value of our management team to get the job done.”

High Touch managers aren’t the only ones toting the responsibility to succeed. The company is employee-owned—through its Employee Stock



**“When I see who else has received [the APRO Lifetime Achievement Award], and then to be the first vendor to receive it, I’m darn proud... This is not a one-man company and even though my name happens to be on the trophy, it’s really recognition of our company as a whole.”**

inventory, payment transactions, rental agreements, customer information and collections. The system compiles all data, produces relevant statistics and enables the store to write a daily report. PRO/Store also includes completely integrated home-office capabilities, connecting home offices and stores, so that information must be entered into the system just once.

Compatible PRO/Accounting soft-

Ownership Plan (ESOP), High Touch is 49.5 percent owned by employees; Jones owns about another 24 percent and one of the company's founders owns the remaining 26 percent.

"Everybody understands what they do affects the bottom line," Jones says. "And the bottom line affects whether there's a year-end bonus, a 401K match or money put into the ESOP. We believe in the value of the employee.

"People are truly our best resource," says Jones. "Hiring is the critical element. And you do need good systems, both software and management systems, ways to manage the company and the people and the products. You can't be sloppy. Without good people, sound operating procedures and systems—and without belonging to the trade association—I don't see how you can succeed."

**T**he trade association Jones refers to—and his conversation is heavily peppered with such references—is the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations. Jones recently was honored by the organization with the Ernie Talley Lifetime Achievement Award—the first ever presented to a rent-to-own vendor.

"It was my proudest professional moment," Jones says. "When I see who else has received this award, and then to be the first vendor to receive it, I'm darn proud. I'm proud personally and proud our company has been able to do—and allow me to do and allow all of us together to do—what we've done. This is not a one-man company and even though my name happens to be on the trophy, it's really recognition of our company as a whole."

High Touch has also been recognized this year as among Wichita's fastest growing companies and one of the city's top 10 best places to work. But the APRO award holds special significance for Jones, chiefly because of his deeply held belief in the value of the association.

"We, as a company, plug APRO," says Jones. "We offer an APRO discount to clients who belong. I have a philosophy. I came into this industry believing a strong industry association means a strong industry. As of today, High Touch is extremely reliant on the rent-to-own



industry, so if the industry suffers, then we're going to suffer, too."

Jones involvement in APRO has included serving as a committee member, traveling to Washington, D.C., to talk with congressional delegations about industry issues and using his company's resources to help put together supporting statistics for the industry in lawsuits and legislative tussles. His

*Success*

**"Without good people, sound operating procedures and systems—and without belonging to the trade association—I don't see how you can succeed."**

favorite part of being involved in APRO, however, is the association events.

"From a vendor standpoint, [an APRO] trade show is about half user-group meeting and half product presentation," Jones says, "and we always come home smarter than when we went. Anytime APRO people get together, problems come up and problems get solved, because people quit being competitors and turn into partners. We learn what's going to happen next in the industry and where some of the prob-

lems are, and we come home and examine ways we can help solve them, either with our software or with something else we can commit to the organization that might help. To make the industry strong, I believe APRO and its events must be strong, so we'll continue to commit whatever we can afford to do."

lems are, and we come home and examine ways we can help solve them, either with our software or with something else we can commit to the organization that might help. To make the industry strong, I believe APRO and its events must be strong, so we'll continue to commit whatever we can afford to do."



lems are, and we come home and examine ways we can help solve them, either with our software or with something else we can commit to the organization that might help. To make the industry strong, I believe APRO and its events must be strong, so we'll continue to commit whatever we can afford to do."

**O**f course, once Jones officially retires at the close of the year, the big decisions at High Touch will belong to someone else—sort of. Fellow Kansan and an APRO past-president Wayne Chambers (currently with Advance America Cash Advance Centers) has already been tapped to step into Jones' presidential shoes in the new year, but Jones will continue to weigh in on company concerns for the next several years as a member of its board of directors.

Jones also currently serves as board

chairman for not only Wichita's Westlink Christian Church, but also Manhattan Christian College. In between board meetings, Jones says he plans to see more of his son, daughter and six grandchildren, expand his already voracious appetite for books and spend more time in his capacity as a licensed ham radio operator (callsign N0HYL).

But the key post-retirement activity Jones plans to undertake, he won't be doing alone. "I decided to retire while [my and my wife's] health is still good,

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

# TO YOUR HEALTH!

Take advantage of APRO's health insurance program—offering you the opportunity to custom design a health insurance plan to fit your company's needs.

#### CHOICE OF PLANS:

- Preferred Provider Organization
- Health Maintenance Organization
- Health Savings Account  
*(minimum deductible is \$1,000)*

#### OPTIONS INCLUDE:

- Doctors office visit co-pay  
*(not subject to deductible)*
- Prescription drug card
- Deductibles: none, \$250, \$500, \$1,000, \$2,000, \$2,500, \$3,000, \$4,000 or \$5,000
- Co-insurance:
- PPO plan: 90% in-network/70% out-of-network or 80% in-network/60% out-of-network
- HMO plan: 80% or 100%
- HSA plan: 80% or 100%
- Participation: owner(s) only or all eligible employees
- Optional benefits include  
*(may not be available for firms with one employee):*
- Maternity  
*(paid the same as any illness)*
- Life/AD&D
- Dental

**GET THE DETAILS AND NO-OBLIGATION INFORMATION ON APRO'S HEALTH PLAN BEFORE YOUR NEXT RENEWAL AND COMPARE IT TO YOUR CURRENT PLAN.**

**CONTACT YOUR APRO INSURANCE PROGRAM REPRESENTATIVE TODAY:**

**800/349-1039  
WWW.MMICINSURANCE.COM**

