

Cassidy: Silicon Valley company's technology is interesting but it's no Dickie Smothers

Mercury News Columnist

Posted: 11/10/2011 11:42:38 AM PST

Updated: 11/11/2011 05:22:10 AM PST

Greg Barrett can talk a blue streak about acid reflux, esophageal cancer, radio frequency ablation and Barrett's esophagus.

OK, not a laugh a minute, but it's his job. He's a CEO in Silicon Valley where one of the toughest things to do is generate buzz for your obscure company in the land of buzz giants like [Facebook](#), [Google](#) ([GOOG](#)), [Apple](#) ([AAPL](#)) and the rest.

But as Barrett is telling me all the wonders of his medical device company's Halo 360 system, all I can think about is Dick Smothers. Yeah, Dick Smothers, and how Barrett's Sunnyvale company, BARRX Medical, was arguably responsible for preserving this national treasure and San Jose's favorite son.

Who's Dick Smothers, you ask? Draw up a chair, junior. Dick Smothers, a San Jose State alum and former Scotts Valley resident, was one half of the Smothers Brothers, a team completed by Tommy Smothers, now a Sonoma County winery owner. The pair's "Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," which aired in the late 1960s, broke new ground in television and changed the medium forever. Through songs, skits and their schtick (Dick

as straight man, Tommy as innocent provocateur), the show criticized the war in Vietnam, the Nixon administration and the establishment in general, while railing against racism.

Sure, now we have "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" and "The Colbert Report" and a host of cable shows on which no subject seems taboo. But television was timid back then, and CBS ultimately canceled the show despite high ratings, presumably because it had become too controversial. The act survived on

records and in live performances.

"If you look at the history of what they did," says Barrett, putting acid reflux aside for a moment, "really a lot of the talk shows that came after that, one could argue that they really did create that whole revolution."

Barrett met Dick Smothers earlier this year after Smothers had undergone a treatment using BARRX's Halo system, a device that uses radio waves to burn off a very thin layer of precancerous cells from the surface of the esophagus. The procedure, known as radio frequency ablation, has the potential to transform the treatment of a condition called Barrett's esophagus (named for the doctor who discovered it, not the BARRX CEO). The ailment is caused by acid reflux and leads in a relative few cases to esophageal cancer. Yes, Barrett says, he was aware of Smothers' place in the pop culture pantheon when he met him (and when Smothers underwent the procedure).

"I have some of his records," says Barrett, 58. "I grew up in that time, so I remember him very, very well -- unlike some of my employees, who don't know who he was."

Smothers, 71, who lives in Florida, knew about the debate over the relatively new procedure. Because only a tiny percentage (generally in single digits) of those with Barrett's esophagus ultimately develop cancer, some doctors wonder whether the therapy is worth the cost and inconvenience. But Smothers says in his mind any chance of cancer was too big a chance.

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

"There are so many things in this world that you have no control over," he says by phone, "and that's something you can do."

It would be unseemly for a company to cash in on the health problems of a celebrity (can you imagine?) and that's not what's going on here. Barrett actually wanted to talk to me about BARRX's high rate of success in 90,000 or so procedures in the United States and the company's push into China, a promising market of 1.3 billion esophagi. Esophageal cancer is a major killer in China, he says, and BARRX has been working with U.S. cancer researchers, the Mayo Clinic in Arizona and Chinese authorities to study the problem and secure approval for the company's device.

But it was the Dick Smothers angle that hooked me. No, Smothers is not performing these days. The brothers retired last year, though Dick has his eye on "Dancing With the Stars." And no, he's not a paid celebrity spokesperson for esophageal ablation (and really, no one is lining up for that job). It's just that after years of living the unhealthy life of a performer on the road (you try living on Roloids and martinis), he's become a bit of a health and fitness nut.

Smothers says mostly he wants Barrett's sufferers to know their options. Well that, and one more thing: "I want people to know I'm alive."

Which in the end is kind of the point for everyone involved.

Contact Mike Cassidy at mcassidy@mercurynews.com or 408-920-5536.