

SMALL BUSINESS

Bringing hearts back online

Company distributes defibrillators

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FAIRFIELD

Bob Stichel was home one Wednesday night a few years ago when his cell-phone began to buzz. By the number, he knew a customer was calling and figured there was a problem.

He was right. But the safety director at a Hamilton Township flooring factory had phoned to report a happy ending – a worker who had just suffered cardiac arrest was now alert and talking, thanks to quick action and a user-friendly defibrillator.

The call made Stichel's day, given that it was his company, LifeSavers Inc., that had sold them the heart-reviving device.

"Those are the stories that make what we do so worthwhile," he said.

The 43-year-old founded LifeSavers in 1992 to provide training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and general first aid. It has since grown to become a top distributor of automated external defibrillators (AEDs) to businesses and government agencies.

Using an electrical shock, AEDs can revive victims of sudden cardiac arrest by correcting a lethal heart rhythm called ventricular fibrillation. The model LifeSavers sells – Defibtech's Lifeline AED – detects whether an unconscious patient needs such an electrical pulse and emits easy-to-follow voice prompts.

"My 3-year-old knows how to press the buttons, and he's been doing it since he was 2," Stichel said.

Responding to emergencies has been a regular feature of Stichel's life. He has served as an emergency medical technician for 20 years, most of them in Bloom-



DON SMITH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bob Stichel in the LifeSavers showroom. The business sells automated external defibrillators to businesses and government agencies.

field before his move a few years ago to Washington Township.

During the 1980s, people often called to ask Stichel if he could run CPR training sessions. Eventually, he and fellow EMT Scott Larson got to pondering the business possibilities.

In 1992, Stichel quit his job at medical device company Becton Dickinson and Co., and for \$2,000 – \$400 for legal fees, \$1,600 for marketing materials – got his enterprise started. Larson now heads the training center.

After starting with CPR training, the company began selling AEDs in the late '90s. In 1999, a state law was passed granting immunity to businesses and agencies that bought AEDs and received training in how to use them.

At that point, units fetched

about \$4,000, an investment many companies balked at. Things changed dramatically after 2003, when Defibtech introduced its AED for \$1,495.

Stichel was selling another brand then but, curious about the new competitor, went to meet with Defibtech's founder in Princeton. With the price, and the quality he found, Stichel quickly swapped loyalties.

Four years later, LifeSavers is the biggest Lifeline dealer in the country, having sold 14,000 of the 50,000 units purchased worldwide since 2003, Stichel said.

Its biggest contract was with the state of New Jersey in 2005. More than 4,000 Lifelines are now in schools, police cruisers, firehouses and other public locations. While the model generally

sells for \$1,245, state and local agencies can buy one from LifeSavers for as little as \$829.

Businesses, including United Water New Jersey Inc. and Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., represent about a quarter of the company's customer base. Stichel said employees anywhere in a building should be able to reach an AED within three minutes.

To meet that standard, for example, the owners of a 1.6-million-square-foot warehouse in Connecticut purchased six of the devices, Stichel said, adding that emergency response training is an important complement to the devices.

"It's not an AED that's going to save your life," Stichel said. "It's a program where employees are trained to respond to an emergency."

How and where to market remains one of Stichel's toughest questions.

"Since 78 percent of cardiac arrests occur in the home, we really need to get the masses trained," he said. "In a sense, everybody is our target market."

Many of their referrals come from police, fire and first-aid departments. The company also drums up business at trade shows and through EMS publications and has reached out to building managers.

Stichel envisions business associations and chambers one day buying defibrillators for downtown districts, so that one would be available in at least one business on every block.

Most important in his growth strategy, Stichel said, is giving customers the kind of support

LifeSavers Inc., Fairfield

Founded: 1992

President/owner:
Bob Stichel

Employees: Six

Revenue: \$4.5 million
(projected 2008)

Web site: lifesaversinc.com

Advice: Only go into an area of business that you truly understand, Stichel says. "Some people put an emphasis on the big business plan, and come up with numbers that aren't realistic."

By the numbers

Annual deaths from sudden cardiac arrest in the U.S.: 325,000

Workplace episodes:
At least 10,000

Without defibrillation:
10 percentage point drop in the chances of survival each minute

Average response time of emergency medical services: 10 to 11 minutes

Survival rate for those who wait for EMS: 5% to 7%

Sources: Sudden Cardiac Arrest Association; U.S. Department of Labor

and flexibility they'll want to tell others about.

That entails offering training seven days a week, at whatever location best suits clients. (He once trained a midnight crew at the U.S. Postal Service sorting center in Kearny.) He also insists that his own employees answer calls before they go into voice-mail and leaves his cellphone number as an emergency contact.

"I built this business on one customer at a time," he said. "If you serve people in that way, they become your best leads."

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