

PREPARING FOR TAKEOFF

Casimir Sienkiewicz's company has designed valve controls for a rocket-propelled racing vehicle, as well as precision tools for medical devices. Now he's designing a business plan for growth.

BY JENNIFER BJORHUS
Pioneer Press

It's an unlikely place to glimpse the future of space tourism. But there it is next to the Farmers' Market in downtown St. Paul: little Caztek Inc.

Casimir "Caz" Sienkiewicz, 31, launched his design engineering company three years ago, and its largest client remains Xcor Aerospace Inc., a private developer of rocket engines in Mojave, Calif. A pioneer in the nascent industry of private space travel, Xcor is developing a rocket-powered vehicle economical enough to send rich adventurers into sub-orbital flight, up some 70 miles or so, just for the view and the thrill of weightlessness.

Xcor competes with a handful of other companies in the space race. Suborbital flights with paying clients are still about two to three years out, according to the nonprofit Space Tourism Society in Los Angeles, although if you have \$20 million you can pay the Russians to fly you to the International Space Station, which is orbiting about 220 miles up.

Sienkiewicz (say shin-KAY-vich) started by designing the cryogenic valve controls for Xcor's rocket-propelled racing vehicle.

His company also works for about eight other clients in medical device manufacturing and industrial design. For Long Lake-based Roth Greaves & Associates Inc., Caztek developed a variety of precision tools for micro-resistance welding to build implantable medical devices. For InterRad Medical Inc., another St. Paul startup, it designed and developed catheter leads that don't require suturing or stapling. Typical jobs range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 and take from one to six weeks to complete.

It all began in 1997, when Sienkiewicz moved to the Twin Cities to work at Fridley-based Kurt Manufacturing Inc. Sienkiewicz, who describes himself as largely self-taught, has a two-year associate degree in mechanical engineering and technology from Springfield Technical Community College in Springfield, Mass. He became program manager at Kurt for subcontract manufac-



Casimir "Caz" Sienkiewicz, owner of Caztek Inc., says he spends a lot of time on top of his desk, often when he's on the phone. Caztek's largest client is Xcor Aerospace Inc., a private developer of rocket engines in Mojave, Calif., that is developing a rocket-powered vehicle to send rich adventurers into suborbital flight.

PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS BY JEAN PIERI

turing for Boeing.

A few years later, after joining Filtration Products Corp. in Hamel as director of engineering, he discovered Xcor Aerospace. Sienkiewicz said he's been fascinated with rocketry since he was a boy of 9 and discovered Xcor by googling "liquid rocket engine."

He was so intrigued that during a business trip to Las Vegas he took time off to drive to Mojave to give them his résumé. He ended up eating lunch with the entire crew and returned that evening to watch them test-fire a rocket engine. Xcor started giving Sienkiewicz small engineering projects. The relationship grew and Xcor tried to hire him, he said. He loved working with the company, but decided he needed to start his own, he said.

In 2004, he left Filtration Products to start Caztek. Sienkiewicz was working out of his garage in his Lake Nokomis home until engineer Tim Bachman recruited him to sublease space in St. Paul's Allen Building. Bachman's company Kyber Design also designs precision components, but also has the machining equipment, such as a drill press, to build the prototypes. Bachman has attracted two other small engineering shops to the space too, as well as a graphic design company and a business development consultant. The group, all located on one floor of the building, shares a kitchen and conference room — and skills. They frequently give each other work.

"That's the glory of having everyone down at one spot, we can all use each other's strengths," Bachman said.

With his new base of opera-



Casimir Sienkiewicz's goal is to transform Caztek from a small subcontractor to a \$5 million first-tier contractor dealing directly with original equipment manufacturers such as Medtronic or Boeing. **Above:** Sienkiewicz holds a main propellant valve for a rocket-powered airplane.



Sienkiewicz now spends more time researching potential customers and making cold calls.

With an eye to seeking outside financing to grow, he's also finally drafting that business plan.

tion — Caztek also has an office in Mojave — Sienkiewicz hired his first full-time employee.

"I didn't think I'd entice someone to come work for me in my garage," he said.

Caztek scored more work through Symmetry Solutions, a

Brooklyn Center-based reseller of SolidWorks, the computer aided design software Caztek uses. When customers call Symmetry Solutions seeking help with mechanical designs and prototypes, employees refer them to Caztek.

TALK BACK

Know any successful entrepreneurs? E-mail sundaybusiness@pioneerpress.com.

Sienkiewicz's goal now is transforming Caztek from a small subcontractor to a \$5 million first-tier contractor dealing directly with original equipment manufacturers such as Medtronic or Boeing. After all, his pedal-to-the-floor approach to getting jobs done and making customers happy — sometimes seven days a week, 14 hours a day — is OK for a work-obsessed single guy. But to grow he needs a new business model.

"We're starting to cross that threshold," said Sienkiewicz.

To that end, last December he revamped Caztek's Web site. He now spends more time researching potential customers and making cold calls. With an eye to seeking outside financing to grow, he's also finally drafting that business plan.

It's another big leap for a gearhead who always found so much work flowing his way that he never had to strategize much. With a full-time employee, he has to think about work flow as much as about the designs he labors over.

"It's an interesting dance you do with the work load versus the capacity," he said. "There isn't a lot of margin for making a mistake."

Jennifer Bjorhus can be reached at jbjorhus@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-2146.

FOLLOW UP

Where are they now?

Name: The Springboard Group LLC

Product: Executive coaching and management consulting.

Location: Mendota Heights

Web site: www.yourspringboard.com

2004 revenue: \$100,000

Founded: 2003

Profiled: November 2004

Challenge then: Building client base and focusing on specialty.

Now: Heavy demand for executive-level coaching has been key to Springboard's success since 2004.

Sherry Essen continues to work with people switching jobs or careers, and teaching employees communication skills for the big speech or presentation. But more than half of her business now is executive-level coaching — grooming executives for promotions, helping managers ease into top jobs, teaching CEOs how to prioritize tasks and strategize when to go full-throttle, among other things.



PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO
JEAN PIERI

Executive coach Sherry Essen teaches clients how to project a good image and communicate well.

Successful leaders, she said, are very good at doing just enough.

Springboard, which Essen still runs out of her home office — has added a handful of subcontractors. Essen also found that strong demand enabled her to charge more. So 2006 revenue was \$250,000. About 15 percent of sales comes from key client Target Corp., but Essen has added accountants Virchow Krause & Co., Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and many mid-size organizations.

Her hurdle now: deciding whether to find a partner to grow.

"I need to give some serious thought now to getting office space and getting more people together and taking a look at that business model," Essen said.

She said she also wants to deepen Springboard's industry expertise and find ways for her to develop professionally and stay fresh.

— Jennifer Bjorhus

COMPANY SPECS

Name: Caztek Inc.

Location: St. Paul's Lower-town

Web: www.caztek.com

Founded: 2004

Employees: Two full-time

2006 revenue: \$250,000

Product: Design engineering services for aerospace, industrial automation and medical-device manufacturing.

Competition: Small engineering firms such as Long Lake-based RothGreaves & Associates Inc. (also a client).