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Business: Manufacturing

New contract could take local product into space

By BOB SCHAPER, *Rockford Register Star*
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ROCKFORD -- A Rockford company that manufactures a high-tech drug, alcohol and fatigue-screening device is set to land a major contract that will lead to new sales and a possible expansion of the firm's market.

MCJ Inc., owned and staffed by Judi Gerstein and John Dal Santo, makes EyeCheck, an instrument that measures human pupil fluctuations to within 1/100th of a millimeter. Dal Santo, 54, said the eye movements can be correlated to brain impairment.

"It's the same thing as a doctor who shines light in your eyes," Dal Santo said. "He's looking for abnormal movement."

MCJ has sold about 2,000 EyeChecks in six years, at a cost of about \$8,800 each. But now the company is entering an agreement with a Montana nonprofit group that could lead to hundreds of new sales.

The deal between MCJ and the Inland Northwest Space Alliance, an aerospace development organization formed by the University of Montana, is expected to be finalized by May 1. The Space Alliance, based in Missoula, Mont., is teamed with NASA to develop a network of biomedical sensors in support of human health research.

George Bailey, president of the Space Alliance, said his organization would test EyeCheck's usefulness to space shuttle crews.

MCJ Inc.

- Address: 810 E. State St., Suite 104, Rockford
- Top executives: John Dal Santo and Judi Gerstein, owners
- Annual revenue: \$2 million
- Products: Noninvasive drug-screening devices; finger-print identification equipment.
- Employees: 2
- Customers: Law enforcement agencies, parole and probation departments, research organizations

Source: MCJ Inc.



Gary L. Carlson/Rockford Register Star

Judi Gerstein and John Dal Santo demonstrate the new MCJ EyeCheck machine. The device detects drunken drivers by scanning their pupils.

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"NASA has no way of measuring how well-rested their astronauts are when they're in space," Bailey said. "If it proves effective, we're looking at some point at taking EyeCheck into space."

The Space Alliance will also research the medical diagnostic benefits of EyeCheck. Though he declined to give details, Bailey said the device could be used to check for certain medical conditions -- something that would greatly increase the instrument's potential market.

Under the deal -- which includes a distributorship with a for-profit Montana firm -- Dal Santo estimates the company could sell more than 1,500 units this year. EyeCheck is manufactured in Rockford on a contract basis.

To check for the presence of illicit drugs, alcohol or fatigue, subjects using EyeCheck stare into the binocular-shaped device. With their left eye, they see a red circle and crosshair. Green lights flash in their peripheral vision after 30 seconds, and after an additional six seconds, the test is finished.

Gerstein said impaired individuals usually find EyeCheck enjoyable.

"The more drugged up they are, the easier it is," she said. "It's a psychedelic experience, because when you're impaired, that red looks awful cool."

The idea for the device came during a trade show in Wheeling, W. Va., in May 1996. At that time, MCJ was involved in making devices that checked only for fatigue. Representatives from the National Institute for Justice asked if EyeCheck could be modified to test for chemical impairment.

After more development work, MCJ sold its first units to the Illinois State Police in 1999.

Master Sgt. Phil Beu of the Boone County Sheriff's Department said his organization plans to purchase eight EyeChecks.

"We feel they will be very beneficial to us," Beu said. "We've used them on a couple of roadside safety checks."

We'll have several on a shift."

Beu said he liked the non-intrusiveness and portability of the device.

"Basically it's just something that people look into," he said. "You're not doing anything different than a portable Breathalyzer."

Other local customers include the Winnebago County Probation Department, the Champaign-Urbana Probation Department and 14 drug courts across Illinois.

Gerstein said EyeCheck was popular among parole and probation officers, who use the device to screen their clients during office visits. EyeCheck is more convenient, and less expensive, than urinalysis and other more traditional methods of drug and alcohol screening.

Dal Santo said the company doesn't spend much on advertisement, preferring to rely on word-of-mouth and a system of local distributors. The two spend much time traveling the world, demonstrating and selling their device in places like Dubai, Singapore, Italy and England.

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On the Web

www.mcjeyecheck.com