

WATER-JEL TECHNOLOGIES

Growing and Healing

Carlstadt company makes first-aid products

As any first-aid professional knows, burn victims continue to burn after they have been removed from a fire. It's a grisly lesson in physics, but it's also the reason for the success of a Carlstadt manufacturer's signature product, a first-aid fire blanket that "acts as a heat tank, drawing the heat out of the body," says Howard Hirsch, chief executive of Water-Jel Technologies.

The Water-Jel fire blanket, made in Carlstadt has over the past 25 years become a mainstay in emergency response vehicles and at military and industrial first aid stations around the world.

The Army is one big customer, stowing the blankets that come in orange canisters in its tanks and personnel carriers.

The blankets are made and packed in one of the so-called clean rooms inside a 65,000 square-foot factory and warehouse complex on Veterans Boulevard in Carlstadt. Women wearing disposable caps and shoe covers soak the thin woolen blankets by hand in a vat filled with foamy white solution.

They then place them in hefty bright-orange canisters lined with a clear plastic film. The canisters are capped, sealed and boxed at a rate of about 1,000 a day.

The blankets have a five-year shelf life and sell for \$60 to \$200 each, depending on the size of the blanket and the size of the order. They have been on the market since they were first certified by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for medical use in 1980, after being developed by Water-Jel predecessor Thrilling Medical Technologies. The Army and Navy started using them in 1990. And just recently, the Marine Corps began buying smaller Water-Jel burn dressings, gel-soaked bandages in foil pouches for the first-aid kits carried by soldiers into combat.

A new Water-Jel product, a hand sanitizing gel, is being tested by U.S. troops in Iraq to see if it helps prevent dysentery.

Before acquiring Water-Jel, Hirsch was running a start-up company that made colorful bandages for children's cuts and scrapes, emblazoned with

characters from the World Wrestling Federation, Strawberry Shortcake, and Teletubbies, among others.

Water-Jel Technologies

Location:

243 Veterans Blvd., Carlstadt
Business: Makes and distributes the first aid products for burn victims as well as a variety of first aid ointments, bandages, and sprays for medicine cabinets in the home and workplace.

Chief Executive:

Howard Hirsch

President:

Michael Pisani

Founder:

Manny Thrilling

Employees: 80

Annual sales: \$20 million

Slogan:

"Putting relief in your hands."

Web site: www.waterjel.com

He and partner Michael Pisani acquired Water-Jel four years ago as part of a strategy to expand and diversify the bandage business.

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The bandages continue to be an important and growing part of the business, selling in pharmacies and other retail outlets and in private label deals with other manufacturers.

The company also makes first-aid sprays, creams, and ointments for the home and workplace. Some creams and ointments are packed in tiny "unit dose" foil packs specifically for workplace medicine cabinets.

In the past year, Water-Jel opened a sales and distribution center near London to expand sales in Europe, and international sales have been on the rise, he said.

The burn care products account for nearly half of the company's \$20 million in annual sales.

Through the 1980s Hirsch ran a company called DuCair, which makes bath and home fragrance products, before selling it to a Japanese company, Tsumura International. He continued to manage DuCair for some years after the deal. Then from 1996 to 1998, he dabbled in a computer software business before recruiting Pisani- whom he had hired at DuCair- as a partner in the children's bandage enterprise.

It wasn't long before they were looking to expand. An investment banking company introduced them to Water-Jel, and they found the financing they needed at Saddle Brook-based Interchange Bank.

"Sales have tripled since we bought it," Hirsch said.

A new assembly line to fill bottles in a range of sizes should be up and running later this month. And facilities for measuring and mixing ingredients are being expanded as well.

Meanwhile, business development agencies in Tennessee and the Carolinas have been offering tax incentives to try to get the company to move south, but the partners say they're not moving.

"There's a lot of pressure, but we believe we have a great workforce here," Pisani said. The company makes no such claims because they have not been scientifically proved, but it posts testimonials on its Web Site.

In one, a fire protection supervisor at the Indian Point nuclear plant in Buchanan, N.Y., wrote in a trade journal that he believed the use of a Water-Jel fire blanket saved the life of a co-worker by stopping the progression of his third

degree burns, helping prevent infection and reducing his initial pain. A high voltage switch had exploded when the technician touched a hot terminal with a meter probe, causing a flash fire that gave him third degree burns over most of his body and melted his eyeglasses to his face.

He was unconscious, and first responders had little hope. But after multiple surgeries and a lengthy period of rehabilitation, the man recovered and was able to return to work.

"In my opinion, the use of the Water-Jel fire blanket was directly responsible for saving his life, wrote Steve Van Buren.

In another posting, Nancy Caroline, a physician from Metulla, Israel, wrote that she used Water-Jel dressings on a 2-year-old boy who had been scalded by water. She wrote that she believed the dressings, applied at the helicopter launching pad where he was airlifted to the hospital, allowed the boy to recover "with no permanent disfigurement."