

Kiwi marine safety product creates global attention

Vesper Marine has developed a safety product for sailors that has grabbed global attention. A kick-start in research funding from the Foundation for Research Science and Technology will accelerate growth for this company seeking a niche in safety products for marine use.

Necessity is the mother of invention, so the saying goes. For intrepid seafarers Jeff Robbins and Deirdre Schleigh, an overnight business success has been born out of the need to build their own warning system that can prevent them from being run over by huge vessels plying the ocean.

For a product that has only been launched in April 2008, the AISWatchMate has gotten onto the world radar screen pretty quickly.

Its strongest endorsement so far is from the influential US SAIL magazine which awarded AISWatchMate "Gear of the Year" innovation award in its February 2009 edition. Yachties reading sailing blogs have also been enamoured, leading to enquiries from the internet.

GROWTH

Robbins reckons revenue growth for their company Vesper Marine – which has exceeded initial expectations – will continue to be strong. "If we continue along this, we expect to see revenue double or even quadruple from current levels next year."

At least 80% of the AISWatchMate is sold to overseas clients, mainly to people in recreational sailing who need an early warning system. "When you are out there, you run the risk of being run down by freighters. You may have been looking and scanning the horizon, the next thing you are looking at is

this gigantic freighter," Schleigh tells *exporter*.

Schleigh and Robbins set sail from the US across the Pacific in their 40-ft yacht in 2001, arriving in NZ shores in 2003, for what would eventually turn out to be a new adventure – a new business – that would take them away from their carefree seafaring days.

A fortuitous development in world maritime law paved the way for AISWatchMate's development. In 2001, the International Maritime Organisation in 2001 made it mandatory for all sea vessels of over 300 gross tonnes to carry an AIS (Automatic Identification System). An AIS is a VHF transponder system which sends data about its identity, position, speed, bearing and course. The law was put in place partly

as a result of the need to respond to possible terrorist attacks on the US.

Although there were already products in the marketplace that incorporate AIS, they were not ideal. Schleigh says: "We bought a receiver but found the AIS data needed interpretation. There were also other options in the market which incorporate AIS into chart plotters, and softwares, but these were limited. You needed the data to be in your computer programme all the time which is not efficient," Schleigh says.

Robbins was formerly a software programmer from Seattle. Convinced that there is a need for a better solution, he used his software prowess to design a standalone electronic-based solution which resulted in AISWatchMate – a device that receives signals from AIS,



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Vesper saw an opportunity to create an early warning system for ocean sailors.
- > Careful selection of distributors is critical to helping foreign markets in a localized way.
- > Be prepared for cultural differences when reaching new markets.
- > Funding from the Foundation for Research Science and Technology will help accelerate new product development.
- > Assembly of product is done in NZ to maintain quality control.



Deidre Schleigh and Jeff Robbins.

interprets the data sent, and sends alarm signals to avoid clashes. It is able to show graphically if a ship will pass ahead or behind.

TESTING THE PROTOTYPE

A second prototype built was truly tested when the couple took it with them on a trip, sailing from the Panama to Tahiti. "At one point, there were 124 ships that we were monitoring on our device, and we found only five that would be of concern." This was made possible by the device's ability to prioritise targets and filter out false alarms. That gave the couple assurance the product had a real future.

Vesper contracts out the manufacture of the circuit boards, while the units are assembled and then tested at the

company. Robbins says: "People were really surprised we didn't have this (circuit boards) done in China. We have a good manufacturer here and it allows us to maintain our quality and standard."

PATH TO MARKETS

Initial inroads into the US market developed when a yachtie Robbins had met in 2003 expressed interest in selling the product in the US. This contact managed to open doors for AISWatchMate into West Marine, a large US wholesaler of marine products with a chain of stores and an online presence. Vesper Marine's foray across the ditch to Australia was achieved through a sales representative who had inroads into the boating community there. The company has also appointed distributors in the UK and France. Its distributors have the task of opening new channels for Vesper's products in a localised way.

GRANT

New products are in the offing after Vesper received a grant from the Foundation for Research Science and Technology for research that would speed up the company's capability

to bring on new products. Robbins says the company would focus on creating safety products used in marine applications.

For now, the company is focused on expanding its reaches into Europe which puts it on a new learning trajectory. "The challenges of going into Europe come from the cultural differences, different expectations on payment terms, and decisions on exclusivity versus non-exclusivity," Robbins says.

Schleigh says the couple was once asked by a writer of a sailing magazine why they gave up their carefree life of sailing around the world to run a demanding business. "We wanted a challenge. And we have always talked about being in business together. We didn't set out intending to do this, it kind of just landed. We often joke, this is not our retirement, but our pre-tirement." **[END]**

YOKE HAR LEE / WRITER



Yoke Har was formerly a senior Reuters correspondent, a Business Herald writer, and personal finance editor for a regional media company. Most recently she managed internet and intranet content for a global US consultancy.



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