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REPORT SMALL BUSINESS

Getting help from rocket scientists

Program connects small manufacturers, NASA contractors

BY ERIKA RASMUSSEN JANES

EXECUTIVES AT ROSCO Mirror Inc. had developed a truck mirror that they were sure represented a major advance. But one vital element was missing. The Jamaica, Queens, manufacturer couldn't test the mirror's aerodynamics—something that could have a big effect on fuel efficiency.

Luckily, Rosco discovered that it did not need rocket scientists on staff to conduct such a test. Thanks to the Space Alliance Technology Outreach Program, funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, small firms like Rosco can get up to 40 hours of free engineering assistance from some of the nation's top companies.

The program, which began in Florida, offers small businesses access to technical assistance from more than 50 SATOP partner companies, all of which are NASA contractors.

"We match [companies] up with the same experts who solve NASA's everyday challenges," says Ryan McLaughlin, the director of SATOP's New York center, in Syracuse. Since opening five years ago, the center has received requests from about 650 companies based in New York state and have been able to assist 90% of them.

A nasty job

ROSCO MIRROR, the nation's largest maker of bus mirrors, found SATOP through the publicly funded Industrial & Technology Assistance Corp. in Manhattan. Rosco's request was dispatched to each program partner, including Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne in Florida, which accepted the challenge.

"These folks were looking for some sort of computational fluid-dynamics analysis, which allows you to calculate what the drag might be," says Allan Hastings, an aerothermal project engineer at Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne. "We knew that was a really nasty job."

Mr. Hastings also knew the job couldn't be done in 40 hours, so he suggested testing Rosco's prototype mirror against an existing model. "We put the mirrors back-to-back [in the wind tunnel] and gathered data to show that one was better than the other," he says.

Finished product

THE PROCESS HELPED Rosco fine-tune its design. The resulting product, AccuStyle, hit the market in the spring of 2005, and other versions will follow.

"This family of mirrors will account for 30% to 40% of our growth in the near future," predicts Peter Plate, Rosco's manager of commercial and military sales and marketing. "We garnered knowledge from this one test that will enable us to apply better designs to all future products."

A Bronx company, City Theatrical Inc., turned to SATOP to help perfect a lens for a brand-new light-emitting diode spotlight. SATOP hooked the lighting system designer up with an arm of Eastman Kodak. "They helped us get closer to the solution," says Larry Dunn, head of engineering for City Theatrical.

Given the finite amount of free assistance

IN A NUTSHELL

The Space Alliance Technology Outreach Program

Who can apply U.S. businesses with fewer than 500 employees. Requests must concern technical problems that aren't readily solvable via normal commercial channels.

How to apply Online, at www.spacetechnologies.com

Timing Requests are generally approved or denied within 48 hours. It can take two days to a month to find the appropriate Alliance Partner. Projects are typically completed within 90 days.

being offered, Mr. Dunn recommends that small businesses be as "specific as you can about what you're asking for."

It's also a mistake to assume that any project is too small—as Nick Cancro, president of Sailors Solutions Inc., did initially. "I didn't think our little project was something they'd help us with," he says.

But Mr. Cancro eventually applied, and, with the help of Boeing, designed a new LED light for marine and recreational vehicles. The product, called Sensibulb, has helped the Long Island company double its revenues in the last year.

