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Business Rx: A health-monitoring service for seniors that's worn on the wrist

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The entrepreneur

Who could forget the “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up” TV spot for a panic button device for seniors? Though the commercial was often imitated, Cindy Crump and her business partners at AFrame Digital took a different approach: They designed and built a system with a real-time view of the health and well-being of seniors, one that does not rely on someone to press a panic button. Crump and her team leveraged their digital network, software and risk-analysis expertise (gathered throughout a career in telecommunications, financial services risk analysis and e-commerce applications) to create the company’s MobileCare Monitor.

AFrame Digital, based in Reston, launched its service in late 2010. The software interacts with wireless networks, a secure hosted server and wristwatch monitors worn by seniors or any other at-risk individuals. The watch not only has a button to call for help, it also can detect if a user falls or becomes unstable and then send automated alerts to caregivers. The watch continuously monitors a user’s activity level, location and other physiological data (heart rate, temperature, etc.) as he or she goes about daily activities.

The pitch

Crump started AFrame Digital in 2005. She quickly joined forces with Bruce Wilson, now AFrame Digital’s chief operating officer and director of engineering, who is a former colleague, co-founder of CyberCash and veteran entrepreneur. They financed early development through the federal Small Business Innovation Research program with a series of government research contracts and grants. AFrame Digital’s team has grown to eight, including Kelly Besecker, vice president of sales, and Jill DeGraff Thorpe, vice president for strategic initiatives.

Crump

“Our subscription-based monitoring solution creates a virtual safety net in senior living, rehabilitation hospitals and home settings so that caregivers can respond more quickly to falls and subtle changes in a patient’s unique wellness profile, which often precede falls.”

DeGraff Thorpe

“AFrame’s technology is FDA-cleared and complies with federal privacy statutes. It gathers data from users

continuously without them having to do anything except wear the wristwatch monitor. The hosted software uses predictive data modeling — technology that has proved useful in other industries including financial services and other fields — to catch subtle changes in a user’s health. The wireless monitor tracks everything and sends the data to a secure platform, which can then be accessed by the patient’s family, caregivers and doctors. Those people receive immediate alerts via text or e-mail if a user falls or experiences a potential health problem.

“AFrame already has several customers and sells its system directly to senior living communities and rehabilitation hospitals, as well as wireless vendors that sell other panic-button devices. The AFrame system gives care providers an easy, cost-effective, unobtrusive way to monitor residents using few resources. For vendors, AFrame offers the incentive of a revenue-sharing subscription service. For users, it offers better monitoring capabilities than other products on the market for about the same price.”

Crump

“We have been installing systems at a rapid pace and see increasing interest from potential customers as well, but we need to figure out the best way to scale up our sales team and the manufacturing of our wristwatch monitors to meet our volume demands. This will require capital. What’s the best way to meet our demands as we grow?”

Advice

Elana Fine, director of venture investments, Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship

“Given the capital investment necessary to manufacture your product and take advantage of your current demand, you need to identify a well-funded partner that understands the value of your technology and would benefit from helping you underwrite some of the initial deployments.

“I would suggest two possible candidates: (a) a current or prospective channel partner that sees AFrame as complementary to its current business and could provide manufacturing or marketing support; or (b) a signature customer that would commit to purchasing a significant number of units or jointly develop parts of your product that could be used internally as well as in future customer installations. Although you may have to make some sacrifice on price or future revenue, channel and customer partnerships signal confidence in your technology to the marketplace.

“You may also want to look at corporate venture arms that have the necessary industry knowledge to recognize that AFrame’s long-term impact on patient care requires capital investment in the short term. Corporate VCs or ‘strategic investors’ can provide access to distribution channels, additional bargaining power and potential exit opportunities. Strategic investors often syndicate with independent VCs in complex and capital intensive industries such as health care and life sciences.”

Reaction

DeGraff Thorpe

“We pitched the Dingman Center’s Capital Access Network of angel investors in the Washington region, and working with them has been great. We’re now convinced that our ideal investor is someone who has successfully run a technology business, understands what it takes and recognizes the potential of AFrame.”

Crump

“We see ourselves continuing to roll out over the next year with a goal of 500 to 1,000 customers. We’d like to expand into additional markets and eventually become the standard in care for a comprehensive, real-time

health and safety monitoring service. We've had a lot of inquiries — several from outside the United States, including care providers in Europe and Brazil — but before we go to global markets, we first need to lay out our infrastructure to scale up the right way.”

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