

SENSING SUCCESS: ENTECH CAN SPOT TROUBLE

By Christopher Carey | St. Louis Post Dispatch

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Gary Weil didn't have to travel across the world to crack the booming Asian market. Weil, vice president of EnTech Engineering Inc., just walked to his fax machine.

Earlier this year, China Light and Power Co. sought out the St. Louis County-based company to see if it could use its remote-sensing, thermographic testing equipment to find leaks of hazardous chemicals under the streets of Hong Kong.

"The first message said, 'Please send us information,'" he said. "Then we spent several months going back and forth, also by fax."

On Thursday, a deal finally in hand, Weil and another employee of the nine-employee business left on a mission that calls for a week of testing in Hong Kong, followed by several days in Kowloon.

"We don't know quite what we're walking into," Weil said on

Wednesday. "But we're going to try to do everything they want."

EnTech is using its patented, infrared technology to pinpoint spots where oil mixed with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) might be leaking from electric cables buried below Hong Kong.

Because the British-controlled trade center is so densely populated, the more common search method of excavation and exploration would snarl traffic and cause chaos.

EnTech won the job on the strength of word-of-mouth referrals from Italian officials, who used the company to perform similar tests under the streets of Naples and Rome.

"We were very successful with that," said Weil, who won the 1991 Missouri Inventor of the Year award for his system, which is basically an adaptation of military equipment.

The non-destructive system enables EnTech to use thermal sensors and computer-enhanced video images to find leaks and weak spots in electric

distribution systems and factory buildings and equipment.

It also lets the company find trouble spots in underground pipelines and tunnels - such as those MetroLink runs through - and voids in concrete highways and bridge decks.

Weil founded EnTech in 1980 as a one-man company, focusing on energy audits of factories and offices and surveys of electrical equipment.

Because EnTech's non-destructive testing methods are much more cost-efficient than more traditional methods, such as digging or dismantling, its profit margins are high.

Weil declined to discuss the company's revenue or net income, except to say the business has been profitable virtually from its inception.

"We're very conservative," he said. "We try to keep our overhead down and spend our money on our people and our equipment."

A single testing unit costs upwards of \$125,000; Weil estimated that

EnTech has more than six times that much invested in its equipment.

EnTech's success has attracted the attention of bigger companies.

But Weil, who is 43, said he and his wife, Georgiana Will, are more likely to form strategic alliances with the suitors than sell out entirely.

Will, who started as a part-time bookkeeper and now handles administrative matters as the company's president, thinks EnTech could be on the verge of exponential expansion.

"You could almost say we're at a frontier," she said. "We have the potential for some really impressive growth."

EnTech expects much of that growth to come from customers overseas. Businesses in the United States seem less willing than businesses abroad to approach problems in non-traditional ways, Will said.

"We're in such a liability-conscious era that people here walk on eggshells," she said. "But people in other countries still look to the United States for high technology."

Other companies have tried to imitate EnTech's technology, by taking

clues from the roughly 30 technical papers that Weil has published.

But just like a chef with a secret recipe, Weil has taken care to keep rivals from discovering some of his "magic ingredients."

"We figure we're about five years ahead of the competition," he said. "It would take that long for them to figure out what we're doing."

One desperate rival went as far as using some of EnTech's infrared, computer-enhanced images in the sales material it submitted for a pending contact in Mexico, Weil said.

But the ploy backfired when the Mexicans discovered the deception, Weil said.

"They were most impressed that we had technology worth stealing," he said.