

GROWTH STRATEGIES

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PROBLEM SOLVED

Hedging your bets

His planes were grounded for four months after 9/11, but low overhead and a second business helped **David Snell's flight company** survive

By **DAVID WETHE**
Staff Writer

ADDISON — With a basket of free cheese and crackers on the back seat and the nighttime glow of downtown Dallas on the horizon, pilot David Snell has witnessed more than 60 marriage proposals over the past five years.

He's equally beaming over his 11-year-old airplane tour business's ability to withstand a four-month grounding imposed by the Federal Aviation Administration as a result of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Snell said Starlight Flights was able to survive

Starlight Flights

Business: Airplane tours
Headquarters: Addison Airport
Ownership: Private
Top executive: David Snell
Employees: 1
Planes: Six rentals
Annual revenue: \$15,000-\$22,000 (2001)
Phone: (817) 588-1817
Web: www.starlightflight.com

Cajun Crawfish Co.

Business: Crawfish boiling and catering
Headquarters: 17850 Sunmeadow Drive, Ste. 2003, Dallas 75252
Ownership: Private
Top executive: David Snell
Employees: 1
Stores: 1
Annual revenue: \$30,000 (2001)
Phone: (972) 337-2645
Web: www.cajuncrawfishco.com

with minimal overhead costs and the help of two side businesses — seafood and telecom employee recruiting — that feed off one another.

Rather than owning, Snell rents his fleet of six Cessna 172s that each seat three.

Snell also pays for a minimal amount of insurance, which costs him \$500 a year.

"That provides me with the appropriate amount of insurance needed to rent an aircraft for nonstop sightseeing tours," Snell said. "Other companies don't possess the limited insurance I have to take that aircraft out for commercial operations."

His decision to rent has been a crucial factor in his ability to have money left for his other two businesses, he said.

"I didn't want to invest the capital," he said. "It worked out as a great way to go on with very minimal overhead."

As his plane business sat dormant with no revenue coming in from September to December, Snell's upstart seafood business and a telecom employee recruiting company where he works kept him afloat.

Snell says he always finds an opportunity to plug one of his other businesses when he's on sales calls.

"Having the other businesses has really helped set me apart," Snell said. "A lot of people refer to me now as the crawfish flying guy. That's just how they remember me."

Snell charges between \$130 and \$160 per couple for airplane tours, while his costs per flight are only about \$70 to \$90 per hour — including gas.

"We can charge the moon if we want to," he said. "But our niche is we undersell by several hundred (dollars) an hour."

Operating costs are two to four times cheaper than helicopter tours, said Snell, who started Starlight as a sophomore at Louisiana Tech University's flight school.

But as long as his business stays alive, costs take a back seat to flying enjoyment, Snell said.

"The beauty is, I get to fly when I want to," he said. "This business just helps me continue a hobby of mine which I'm passionate about."

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HARDLY WORKING: One of the great things about his company, Starlight Flights, says David Snell, is that he gets paid for doing something he loves.