

Profile

His 2 firms get strong reception

Cell phone signal booster sales booming

BY IAN KATZ
BUSINESS WRITER

Howard Melamed loves to tell anecdotes, and he'll warn you when you're about to hear a good one.

"Let me tell you a story," Melamed likes to say with the nervous energy of someone who has consumed way too much caffeine. "You're going to like this one."

His best story may be the success of his two Coral Springs companies, **CellAntenna Corp.** and **BoatAntenna.com Inc.**, which sell and install devices to improve cell phone reception.

Sales at CellAntenna, the larger company, reached \$2.5 million in 2003 and should pass \$6 million this year, says Melamed. In the past few months, he has traveled to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Israel to meet with manufacturers, and to Guatemala to set up a distributor for CellAntenna's signal boosters and external antennas. Melamed has 12 employees and plans to hire two or three more in sales in the next six months.

Most of CellAntenna's business comes from its Web site, www.cellantenna.com. Its products range from a \$25 antenna that mounts to a car windshield to a \$120,000 wireless Internet zone that CellAntenna is building for the **University of Miami School of Medicine**. The company also installs antennas for offices.

BoatAntenna, whose revenues last year were under \$400,000, sells similar equipment for marine craft.

Melamed's clients include the Army and Navy, New York City and Nextel Partners. Melamed, a lifelong electronics junkie, also sells cell phone jamming equipment to government and police agencies — it is illegal for anyone else in the United States to possess such equipment.

John Hart, a fleet analyst



POSITIVE SIGNALS: Sales at Coral Springs-based CellAntenna Corp., one of Howard Melamed's two companies, are expected to surpass \$6 million this year. Staff photo/Mike Stocker

with the **South Florida Water Management District** in West Palm Beach, says several district employees had been complaining about dropped cell calls. He had heard from a friend about signal boosters, and searched on the Internet, where he found CellAntenna. Employees have noticed "a dramatic 100 percent improvement" in reception, Hart says.

Melamed emigrated to Coral Springs from Montreal 13 years ago. In 2000, while running **Montfort**, a Coral Springs construction company that he still operates in a limited capacity, Melamed saw a niche largely ignored by service providers and infrastructure companies. "Most companies are too small to do this professionally or too big to care about this market," he says.

He likes to tell a story of when he was starting CellAntenna. One night, Melamed was driving to dinner with his wife, Barbara, the company's

vice president. His cell phone rang. The caller wanted to buy a signal booster.

Melamed, eager to complete the sale and too embarrassed to admit that the fledgling company didn't have a call center, told the customer: "Let me connect you with customer service," and passed the phone to Barbara in the front seat. She took the customer's order and hasn't stopped since.

Melamed, who became a U.S. citizen in 2000, is also a local gadfly. He posts his views and information about Coral Springs on his Web site, www.coralsprings.com. In March, he lost his bid for a Coral Springs commission seat.

But with his growing businesses, he has plenty to do. "Let me tell you," he says. "I'm having fun."

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CELLANTENNA CORP., BOATANTENNA.COM

Business: Sale and installation of devices to improve cell phone reception.

Where: 9625 W. Sample Road, Coral Springs

Owners: Howard Melamed and Barbara Melamed

Established: 2000 (CellAntenna in 2002)

Revenues: Combined, about \$3 million yearly

Employees: 12

Advice: "Establish company policies with your employees from the day you hire them. It is important that they know what the rules are to remove any future conflicts."