

# Taking Care of Business

## EMS Entrepreneurs Cash In

by Bruce Goldfarb

**I**t was about 10 years ago, while working as a paramedic/firefighter in a small eastern Arkansas town, that the realization sank in that I wouldn't be on the streets forever. I couldn't visualize myself middle-aged, waking up at odd hours of the night to holster rusting bandage scissors to my hip or strain my back lifting stretchers. But what were my other employment choices?

Over the years, a part-time interest in freelance writing gradually developed into a full-time career—and a surprisingly good living at that.

This is the best of both worlds. I'm still involved in a component of emergency medical services—education and communication—but I don't have to get my hands dirty.

Working from a home office has distinct advantages. I'm unconcerned about appearances; no suit and tie for me. I can work at my own pace and eat when I want. And I can spend more time with my four-year-old son.

In theory, I could even take a nap—if there was time to take one. The work never seems to stop.

One of the disadvantages of self-employment is that you never completely leave the office. Working anytime usually means working *all* of the time. The word processor beckons late at night, when everybody else is asleep. Half of your time is spent hustling for more business. Waiting for

clients to pay up feels like you depend on the kindness of strangers. It's feast or famine. You also have to think about money and taxes and health insurance and acquiring equipment and office supplies. And deadlines. ARGH!

I wouldn't trade it for anything. Heck, I'm writing for the nation's leading EMS magazine. I get to do cool things like hang out at state conferences, like the one held in Pennsylvania last June. In fact, that's where I was first blown away by the tunes and antics of the *Dysrhythmics*, which may well be EMS' first musical-comedy act.

Picture this: Two dudes come out in bright orange jumpsuits, every inch of which are covered with patches and pins. They're Vic and Vern, the enthusiastic but rather dimwitted proprietors of V & V's EMSSRCWTSLCVR, or Vic and Vern's Emergency Medical Service, Stat Rescue, Car Wash, Tanning Spa, Lawn Care and Video Rental.

Vic and Vern sleep on stretchers in their Star of Life boxer shorts, wearing "ultra belts" dangling more equipment than is carried by the average rescue vehicle. They like to defibrillate—*really* like to defibrillate. "By the way," Vic says during his "doc talk" with the base hospital, "the patient refused prophylactic defibrillation."

"Vic" is **John Chamberlin**, a paramedic and stand-up comic whose "day job" is serving as EMS operations manager at Allegheny General Hospital in

Pittsburgh. "Vern" is **Rich Obertots**, a paramedic who teaches EMS and health courses at Pennsylvania's Youngstown State University.

Not only are both of these guys outrageously funny, but their music is great, too. For a song titled "Running Red," they don dark glasses and pneumatic anti-shock suits. They play six-spoked blue electric guitars shaped in the Star of Life. "We go nuts for blood and guts/We want full-fledged amputations, not wimpy cuts/Give us gore and give us more/Come on pretty mama, you know we thrive on trauma," they sing.

Yet underneath the biting parody are respect and admiration for EMS. "These Hands" is a touching tribute to those who work in the profession. "Looking Up to You" pays homage to air-medical services in a slick production featuring photos projected on a large screen and a recording of actual transmissions between a flight crew and receiving hospitals.

It sorta makes you think, why hasn't somebody done this before?

Obertots has been singing professionally since the seventh grade. In 1980, tired of life on the road, he returned home to Ohio and developed an interest in emergency medical care. After taking a first-aid course, Obertots decided that he wanted to go all the way. He became certified as an EMT, then went on to paramedic training.



Meanwhile, he was still composing music and wrote several songs with EMS themes. "It was fun and came easy for me," he says. After receiving his bachelor's degree in 1987, Obertots gained employment as EMS/trauma coordinator at Sharon Regional Health System in Sharon, Pa. In 1988, he performed his absurd brand of music at the hospital's annual Christmas party.

Shortly afterward, he found a kindred spirit in Chamberlin, and the two created the Dysrhythmics. "In about four hours in one afternoon, we basically developed the whole Vic and Vern concept," Obertots said.

The Pennsylvania State EMS conference was their first professional gig. By the time the Dysrhythmics headline at EMS Today in Albuquerque in March, Obertots plans to have an entire line of related merchandising ready, including videos and tapes, coffee mugs and clothing. Pretty soon, you may be coveting a co-worker's "Dysrhythmics World Tour" scrub top, acting out Vic and Vern routines between calls or humming "M.I. in Love" in the shower. It could happen.

And the Dysrhythmics is just the first step. Obertots has formed a company called Bakers Street Group designed to market management and information services and develop products ranging from medical education to interactive video communication equipment and programs.

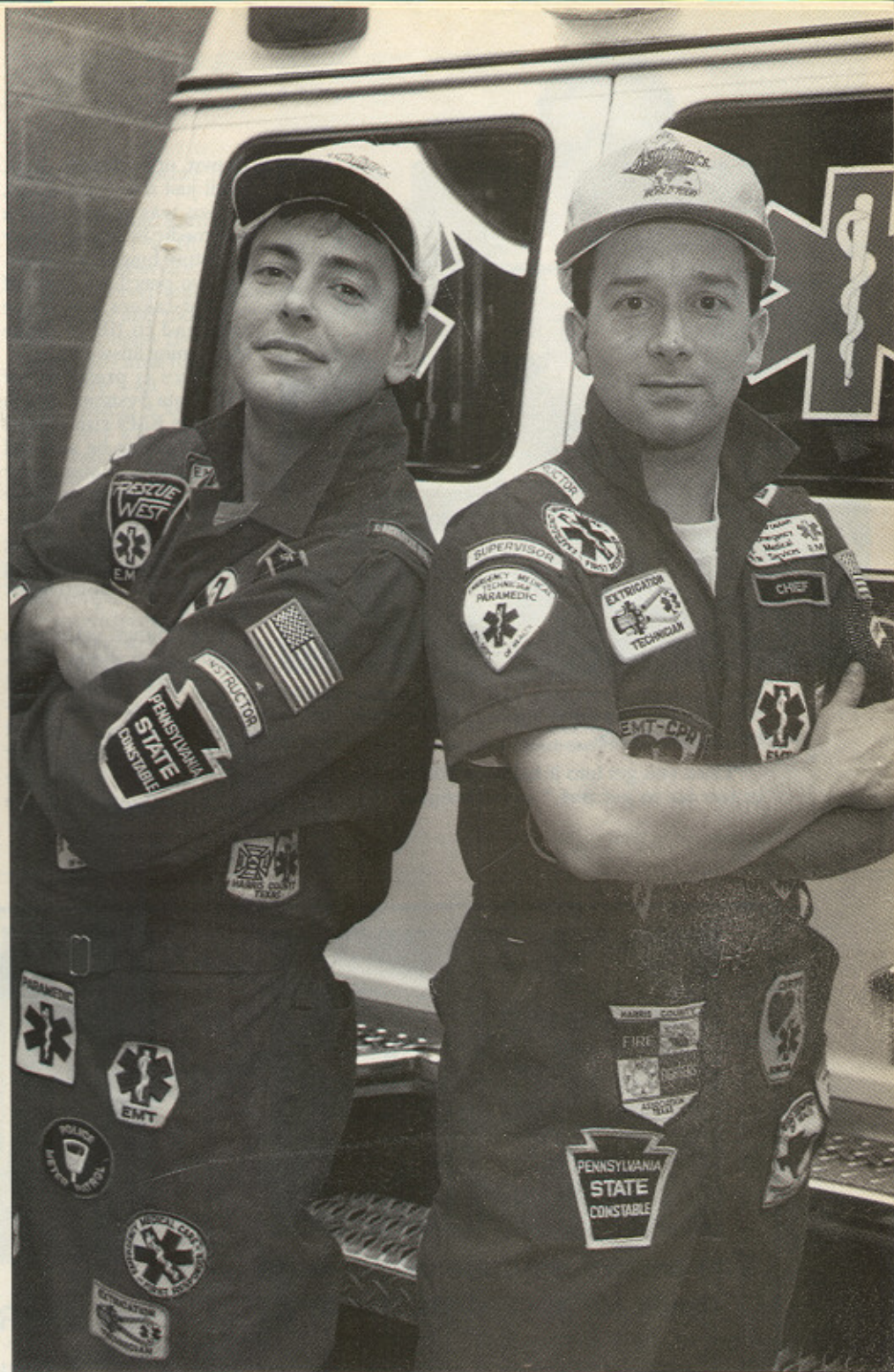
The idea is brilliant: Use the music to get the crowd's attention, then hit them with an educational message. The weird thing is that it just might work. Without any sort of publicity, word of the Dysrhythmics has already spread. Several people have approached Obertots about performing at conferences and seminars.

EMS needs more creative types, like Obertots and Chamberlin, people with a bent toward enterprise, willing to risk developing new products and services that push the leading edge of the envelope.

Through entrepreneurship, new ways of doing things are discovered: a better spine-immobilization device, an improved rescue vehicle design, a superior method of EMS dispatching. And if these risk-takers are able to make an honest buck doing it, so much the better.

Competition in the marketplace helps keep down the cost of goods and services. It encourages companies to enhance the design of products and to improve workmanship and quality. If a company doesn't stay on the ball, it may soon find an upstart taking out chunks of its market share.

At one time or another, most of us



John Chamberlin, a.k.a. Vic (left), and Rich Obertots, a.k.a. Vern (right), formed the Dysrhythmics as a way to merge music and medicine. Now they're headlining at state and national EMS conferences and are planning a line of related merchandising for their fans.

have considered starting our own company. But something always gets in the way. "I don't know anything about business," you might say. "My ideas are too new. Nobody has done this before." Or, you might admit the most frightening prospect: "I could fail."

Yes, you *might* fail. But there are people out there who are doing it. Their message is this: It can be done. It is pos-

sible to succeed in business and still remain in EMS. And there is room for more.

For many, the urge to try one's hand at commerce is irresistible. You start out testing the waters, working long hours, making contacts, lining up deals. Before you know it, the brass ring is within reach, and you have a chance to make The Leap to self-employment.





Douglas Brown's company, EMS Data Systems, has the edge over its competitors thanks to his firsthand knowledge of EMS.

"Once you get into it halfway, you're in too far to get out," says Douglas

came the question as to how to enter the data. After much contemplation, the

Brown, of Scottsdale, Ariz. Until just a few years ago, Brown was working as a paramedic in Tucson. Now his future hinges on a number-two pencil, the bane of all test-takers who have ever had to fill in those maddening answer dots.

Brown is president of EMS Data Systems, which markets EMS run report forms that can be scanned directly into a computer system. His company grew out of a project he was involved in while working for the EMS Coordinating Council of Southwest Arizona.

The Council wanted to automate run sheets. It surveyed state systems and developed a list of data elements that were deemed important to collect. Next

Council settled on using forms that could be scanned, and that meant using dots that had to be filled in with pencils.

A pilot project in southern Arizona proved that the automated system could work. "The first forms we got back were atrocious, but we also found that field people would grow accustomed to completing the document," Brown said. "They would become better at it over time. Once we got over that learning curve, we got back some real good information."

Despite this initial success, funding for the project was cut. Rather than see a half-developed system die on the vine, Brown decided to take it private. Along with a programmer and a systems analyst, Brown formed EMS Data Systems. Years later, after an investment of 5,000 hours of programming and development and more than \$75,000 out of pocket, EMS Data Systems is thriving.

The company has contracts with 11 statewide systems and several private companies and has four full-time employees. Through modem-equipped laptop computers, Brown can provide



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service for his customers 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world. "We use software that allows us to take control of their computer, so we can assist them with problems at any hour of the day or night," he said. "If they have a problem, within a few minutes, we'll be on their computer looking at what's going on."

But it wasn't always this easy. For a while, Brown kept a full-time job on an ambulance while nurturing EMS Data Systems. "It was rough," he said. "There are a couple of years that are an absolute blur."

Brown sees his work as more than simply selling a product. It requires knowledge of EMS issues to help local systems decide how to collect and use data. Rather than leave EMS, Brown is helping to enhance it. "I enjoyed working in the field, but I didn't want to see myself as a 40-year-old paramedic," he says. "I wasn't burning out by any stretch of the imagination, but I saw that there were a lot of things that I could do in terms of improving prehospital care."

**John Raffner**, of King of Prussia, Pa., is another person with one foot in busi-

ness and the other firmly planted in EMS.

For 10 years, Raffner has been a volunteer EMT with nearby Lafayette Ambulance Service. He also owns Nice Lines, a direct-mail company with 42 employees and more than \$2 million in sales that helps fire companies and rescue squads raise funds.

"There's an increasing interest in fund-raising. A lot of squads have never done any kind of active solicitation. They ran bingo games, the carnival, the car wash, the traditional kinds of fund-raising," explains Raffner. "The problem is that they're labor-intensive. The volunteers don't want to be cooking spaghetti or washing cars. They joined the company to be an emergency service provider, not to be begging. They don't want to be fund raisers."

Nice Lines began in the basement of Raffner's parents' home, where he was living at the time. "My only risk was buying my first computer," he says with a laugh. From that one computer, the company has grown to offer a complete line of direct-mail advertising, from



Armed with a single computer and a lot of determination, John Raffner built a successful direct-mail venture called Nice Lines.



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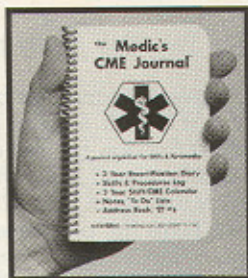
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writing copy to producing camera-ready material to mailing and maintaining a data base. "We do everything but printing," Raffner says.

As a sideline, Raffner began helping EMS groups do direct-mail fund-raising. "A lot of squads are turning to mail solicitation as a legitimate means of fund-raising that's not manpower-intensive," he said. Too often, squads send out amateurish fund-raising letters that don't do the job. "By using some good advertising techniques, simple stuff that people in the squads don't think of, they can bump their response rate up 10 percent or 20 percent, which translates to tens of thousands of dollars."

For the record, a commercial-mail solicitation typically elicits a 5-percent response rate. EMS squads using Raffner's pitch letters sometimes get a 50-percent response rate. One volunteer company recently did a mailing of 17,000 pieces. More than one-half came back, averaging \$25 per household. That's more than \$200,000. "The biggest labor task for [the company] is opening the mail and making out deposit slips," Raffner says.

But more than providing a nifty fund-raising letter, Nice Lines develops a whole public education program for clients—brochures, phone stickers with emergency numbers and press releases.

The financial cut for Nice Lines is modest. The typical charge for a mailing is about \$6,000, including printing and mailing. "If we don't make them money, we don't take a fee for it," Raffner said. Although the service has not been aggressively marketed, Nice Lines has picked up 18 EMS clients. "I'm not doing it for the money," he says. "I feel like I'm giving something to the profession."

Business opportunities such as these do exist in EMS. Entrepreneurs start by finding a need and filling it. "People who want to go into business should analyze their skills and abilities closely," says Obertots. "You have to have a passion for something you want to do. Above all, you have to have determination and belief in yourself."

"You have to be your own motivator," Obertots advises. "When it comes down to those lonely hours of the night and you're asking yourself, 'What have I gotten myself into? What am I doing?' you're the only one there."

*Editor's Note: The Dysrhythmics will be appearing at the EMS Today Conference in Albuquerque, N.M., on March 13.*

**Bruce Goldfarb is a JEMS columnist and chief of the East Coast Bureau.**