

Captive Audience

Joe Ambrefe and SecurityPoint Media in St. Petersburg have thought of another way to reach consumers: Put ads on trays at security checkpoints in airports.

St. Petersburg entrepreneur and sales executive Joe Ambrefe developed the idea for his business on an airport cocktail napkin.

There is a certain ironic justice to that. SecurityPoint Media is an in-airport advertising service, focused on 17-by-20 inch printed messages in the trays at security checkpoints.

"I still have the napkin," says Ambrefe, 41, co-founder, president and chief executive officer of SecurityPoint. "The model hasn't changed from that concept."

The color advertisements are on the inside floor of the security trays, which people use for their laptops, shoes and keys before going through metal detectors. The company does not put ads anywhere else.

"That way, it doesn't create sign noise," Ambrefe says. "It's an audience of one. We're not looking like Nascar or a strip mall. It's efficient looking. It's a brand making a connection."

The economics work like this: The SecurityPoint sells the ad space through an agreement with airport security. Advertisers reach a good demographic, such as frequent flyers. Part of the money from the ads goes toward buying trays, tables and carts that security uses at the checkpoint. SecurityPoint and the airport get a cut.

The idea for SecurityPoint was born out of 9-11. After the terrorist attacks, air travel changed and airports became more crowded, with people waiting in long lines. Ambrefe saw that as an opportunity to capture the attention of those waiting.



Joe Ambrefe and his company, SecurityPoint Media in St. Petersburg, want to expand the security tray advertising service to other airports nationwide. It is in 15 airports now.

SecurityPoint officially debuted in 2005 in Knoxville, Tenn., but years before then, Ambrefe and co-founder Doug Linehan, executive vice president, did focus-group testing and worked with the Transportation Security Administration to hone the service and to get two patents.

The company has three employees in St. Petersburg, plus other employees in the field and an operations team in Boston, Ambrefe's hometown. SecurityPoint is in 15 airports including Jacksonville, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Diego and Denver.

"It has taken time to catch on," Ambrefe says.

Ambrefe worked in the Tampa Bay area, left for Pennsylvania but returned and started SecurityPoint.

"It really is a good area to kick up a business and get it rolling," he says. "This is a good business environment, but the decision was predominantly driven by family."

In the future, Ambrefe wants to expand SecurityPoint to many other airports. The key is developing good relationships with the TSA and its supervisors in each airport.

"We do a walk through, talk with local TSA officials and present the idea to the people in charge of security, then move on to another airport," he says. "We talk with local TSA folks and talk to airport business people. We get it all on the table."

Part of Ambrefe's business challenge is that some of the checkpoints are dark, with no windows and not pleasant to be in.

"Some are dingy," he says. "It's a little like checking into Attica."

Ambrefe would not disclose revenues at the privately held firm. Some of the advertisers include national brands such as Sony, Rolodex, Zappos.com and Sylvania.

Ambrefe worked in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries in sales and marketing. A hospital administration major, he originally intended to become a physical therapist, but found he enjoyed business and sales more.

Ambrefe says he is happy with the company's progress.

"This is alternative out-of-home media that has caught on very quickly because it works," he says.