

# Taser generates a buzz



Jack Kurtz/The Arizona Republic

Steve Tuttle, director of government relations at Taser, demonstrates the use of one of the company's non-lethal weapons, which fire darts, then deliver a temporarily debilitating shock to their victim.

## Airline security concerns boost stun-gun firm

By Hal Mattern  
The Arizona Republic

It was anything but business as usual last Thursday at Taser International, a little-known Scottsdale company that makes electronic stun guns for law enforcement agencies.

That morning, United Airlines announced that it would put more than 1,000 of the company's stun guns in its aircraft cockpits to help pilots fend off hijackers without damaging the planes, prompting a flood of inquiries about Taser International and its products.

By midday, the company's stock price had surged by 20 percent and the phone lines at its headquarters near Scottsdale Municipal Airport were buzzing with calls from investors and the national media. And the calls are still coming this week.

"We knew that the United announce-



Tom Smith

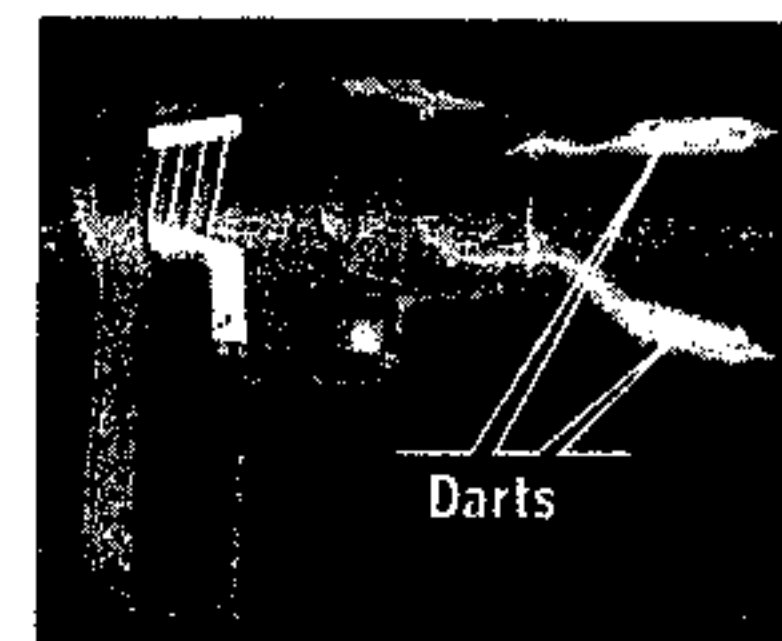
stock."

If the federal government approves United's plans to equip its cockpits with Taser's stun guns, there is speculation that they eventually could become standard equipment on commercial airliners in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. If that happens, Taser International's sales could double.

That would be quite a change for a company that only a few years ago was struggling to make its payroll and whose stock has been publicly traded only since May. The company has 50 employees.

The Smith brothers became interested in stun guns after an early 1990s road rage incident left two of Rick Smith's former high school buddies dead from gunshot

### How the Advanced Taser works



**Fire:** The Taser fires two darts up to 21 feet.

**Strike:** The darts are connected to the weapon by wires and attach themselves to an assailant's skin or clothing.

**Shock:** When the darts hit the assailant, the Taser sends a powerful shock



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would be the perfect non-lethal alternative to handguns for self-defense.

Rick Smith headed to Tucson to work with Jack Cover, who invented the original Taser stun gun in the 1970s. Working out of a garage with materials purchased at a local Ace hardware store, they eventually developed an improved version of the stun gun, called an Air Taser, which uses compressed nitrogen instead of gunpowder to propel the darts.

The Smiths began selling the Air Taser in 1994 at such stores as Sharper Image.

Over the next five years, they developed the pistol-shaped Advanced Taser, a more powerful stun gun that can fire darts up to 21 feet, delivering a 26-watt electrical charge that has been described by victims as feeling like a full-body muscle cramp. The darts, made from straightened fishhooks, are connected to the gun by two strands of wire. They can deliver a paralyzing shock through 2 inches of clothing.

Despite the Taser's effectiveness, it was slow to catch on as a self-defense weapon.

"It was perceived as a gadget," said Rick Smith, Taser International's chief executive officer. "People would say, 'If it is so good, why don't the police use it?' So we changed our focus and decided to build a strong foundation by marketing it to police departments."

The first Advanced Tasers were sold to police in late 1999, and now are used by more than 1,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States, Canada and Europe. The company's sales are expected to top \$6 million this year, double last year's results.

Air Tasers sell for about \$100, while Advanced Tasers cost between \$400 and \$600.

Until recently, the most powerful Advanced Tasers were sold only to police agencies. But after the terrorist attacks, the Smiths decided to market them to airlines as a solution to aircraft security. They asked Arizona's congressional delegation for assistance in persuading the federal government to allow the use of stun guns on airplanes, and even zapped one of Sen. John McCain's staff members with a Taser during a demonstration.

The use of stun guns in cockpits has been endorsed by the Air Line Pilots Association, and the airline security bill signed by President Bush on Monday allows the use of non-lethal weapons in cockpits, pending Federal Aviation Administration approval.

Phoenix-based Mesa Air Group Inc. also plans to use Tasers, while British Airways and American Trans Air are considering using them. Since the United announcement, other airlines have approached Taser about using the guns. The company wouldn't identify them.

The nation's commercial airlines operate about 20,000 planes, and each cockpit could be equipped with two stun guns. Taser officials said use of the guns eventually could spread to cabin crews.

Even so, police agencies are likely to remain



Jack Kurtz/The Arizona Republic

**Electric shocks dance across a target after it was shot by a Taser.**

the company's biggest customers. The New York Police Department, which is evaluating the stun guns for use by its 60,000 officers, could end up buying more Tasers than the entire airline industry, Tom Smith said.

But he isn't complaining about all the attention resulting from the United deal.

"We couldn't interest anyone two years ago," he said. "Now there are investors and bankers calling us. This was a big PR boost for us."