

GREATER BATON ROUGE

Business Report

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question:**Is your business safe from Internet security threats?**

"We make sure we invest in the right business processes, hardware, software and consulting expertise to protect ourselves and our customers. However, it's critical that we be vigilant and constantly on the look out for new threats and solutions."

Erich Sternberg
Starmount Life Insurance & AlwaysCare,
President

**BUSINESS AWARDS****2006****COMPANY OF THE YEAR—UNDER 100 EMPLOYEES****STARMOUNT LIFE INSURANCE CO.**

Total employees: 118

Year founded: 1983

Accomplishments: One of only 15 companies in 2005 to receive an upgrade by national rating company A.M. Best. Starmount processes \$25 million in claims annually, each in less than three business days.

Attention to detail

By offering an impressively high level of service, Starmount has grown to a company boasting 225,000

When you call the AlwaysCare customer service line to inquire about dental and vision benefits, company execs know exactly how long you've had to wait before being served. They also know if you hung up in frustration. That's because the real-time info is posted high on a digital placard in the center of the company's processing area.

"Everything we do revolves around service," says President Erich Sternberg, whose office is a stone's throw from the large monitor. Paying attention to details has paid off. Sternberg says AlwaysCare's 225,000 nationwide customers face average hold times of just 24 seconds and less than 2% of calls are dropped.

AlwaysCare is the brand name of the dental and vision coverage offered through Starmount Life Insurance Co., the 23-year-old business Sternberg's family first launched as Maison Blanche Life Insurance. Its products were marketed to the charge account customers of the family's Maison Blanche Department Store, says Erich's father, Chairman Hans Sternberg.

Today, Starmount provides term life and accident coverage as well as AlwaysCare dental and vision plans. The company's term life products, marketed through direct mail, feature level-cost coverage until age 95, unusual for term policies, which often expire when policy owners become harder to in-

sure. "We thought it was important," says Hans, "to extend coverage."

And while life insurance may be the company's foundation, its dental and vision lines have grown tremendously. AlwaysCare's member numbers have increased 25% a year, says Erich, and it now comprises about 80% of Starmount's business. "We've grown fairly aggressively over the last six years," he says, "but it's been prudent growth. We've been profitable the whole time."

Solvency is a key factor in Starmount becoming one of only 15 companies in 2005 to receive an upgrade by A.M. Best, the national agency that rates about 1,500 insurance companies a year. Starmount went from a B+ rating to a B++. Ratings are based primarily on balance sheets.

The popularity of employer-offered dental and vision coverage is increasing, even though employees may have to absorb part or all of premium costs. "About two-thirds of employers currently offer dental coverage," says Erich. And the company has plenty of competition, mainly from larger carriers such as Met Life, the Principal Financial Group and AIG. But the Sternbergs like their position. They say they entered the dental and vision business early and are one of few companies that offer both under one roof. They also say they've been able to quickly adjust service delivery.

Since 1998, Starmount's staff has



THE STERNBERG DYNASTY: (from left) Erich, Hans and Deborah.

grown from 21 to 118, most of whom are located in Baton Rouge. "We're no longer a small company," says Hans. After expanding the headquarters off Jefferson Highway four times since 1997, they now have plans to build a new 25,000-square-foot space on Goodwood Boulevard in the next three years.

Beyond Baton Rouge, the company will double its current sales force in other parts of the country, including Wisconsin, Texas, Georgia and the Carolinas.

Starmount may be smaller than its competitors, but it has "all the bells and whistles of larger companies," says Hans. In the last few months, the company unveiled an easy-to-use portal that allows customers and health care providers to view benefits summaries and quickly check the status of claims on line. Starmount processes \$25 million in claims annually, each in less than three business days. "It's very unusual to be that fast," he says.

Coming soon, the company's Web site will also feature dental care information. Members will be able to e-mail in-network dentists and access a list of out-of-network dentists whose fees and quality have been rated by a third party. The site will also include frequently-asked questions about dental care and a cost estimator for a variety of procedures.

As for vision coverage, another growing market, Starmount has adjusted to the trend of customers often seeking care on weekends at large retailers such as Wal-Mart. Thus, the customer service line stays open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays to field coverage questions.

It's just another piece in the vital service puzzle, says Erich, as he keeps one eye on the customer service monitor's flashing numbers.

— Maggie Heyn Richardson