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# With big strides, Safeway Step following father's path

## Growing firm hits goals outlined in founder's plan

Premium content from Business Courier by James Ritchie, Staff Reporter

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[Chris Stafford](#), president of Safeway Step, keeps his father's original, handwritten business plan hanging on the wall of the Fairfield-based company.

He believes the firm, which makes a product to help the elderly and others with mobility problems to access the bathtub, is still operating in the spirit of its founder, Don Stafford, who died in 2007. That's even though Safeway Step has moved beyond its 2001 origins as a tiny local operation to a company with a budding national profile, more than \$1 million in outside investment and a plan to double its employee base.

"Dad and I had lots of Bob Evans breakfasts where we would have fun, theoretical conversations: 'Can you imagine if we were able to do an advertisement that ran nationally?'" said Stafford, 36. "We believed that was the potential."

Safeway Step, which in January received \$375,000 from local investment group **Queen City Angels** that it will use mainly for marketing, is trying to capitalize on the desire of an aging population to retain independence. Studies by the AARP and other groups suggest that about 90 percent of people would prefer to stay in their own homes as they grow older.

Stafford would not disclose company revenue but said sales for the first two months of 2012 were up 56 percent over the same period last year. Full-year revenue could be triple

that of 2011. The increases represent an acceleration, Stafford said, of strong double-digit growth for the past three years.

"There's that family connection, so it means that much more to see how the company is starting to develop," he said.

Safeway Step's flagship product, the design and installation process for which Don Stafford received a patent, eliminates the high step typically required for entering a bathtub. Installation runs from \$700 to \$1,800, making it a cheaper option than typical bathroom renovations, which can cost between \$5,000 and \$20,000. The firm sells to homeowners as well as senior living residences, state and local social programs and hospitality properties.

Safeway Step last month embarked on a national television advertising campaign that will air spots on 40 networks, including **MSNBC**, Lifetime and Fox News. And Stafford said he anticipates growing his staff over the next 18 months to about 30 from the current 15.

Queen City Angels, the firm's only outside investor, has put in \$1.2 million over three rounds. The money has allowed the firm to take distribution in-house and expand its network of installers, which include **Home Depot** and remodeling franchises and accessibility companies, to more than 900 throughout the country.

Those were big moves for the company that Don Stafford, a retired Cincinnati district fire chief, started as a one-man show. But they were just what the younger Stafford set out to do when he left his corporate career, which had included stints as a consultant for **PricewaterhouseCoopers** and director of equity strategy for Covington-based **Corporex**, to run Safeway Step.

Members of Queen City Angels liked the firm's management, the demographic and the success that it had already achieved in Greater Cincinnati, having signed on 50 assisted living facilities as customers, said [Don McKee](#), a member of the investor group who has joined Safeway Step's board.

"We're in a unique position," McKee said, "with a product that's about a 10th of the cost of ripping the bathtub out and putting in an alternative – a project that is out of reach financially for many seniors." Safeway Step also offers a bathtub-door product and is likely to introduce other aging-in-place items, such as ramps or life-call systems.

The market for accessibility products can only grow over the next couple of decades, said [Robert Applebaum](#), professor in the department of sociology and gerontology at **Miami University**. About 10,000 baby boomers are reaching age 65 every day. And most people will find that high-end "continuing care" senior facilities are financially out of reach, leaving them to go to a traditional nursing home or find a way to stay put.

"It's a complicated set of things that will keep people in their homes, and the bathroom can certainly be a big factor," Applebaum said. "But you'd have to have a house that already has a bathroom on the ground floor. A single product won't solve the problem, but it could play a role."

Stafford said he still looks at his father's business plan from time to time. The firm is concentrating on a broader array of products now, but is still close to the founding goals.

"It's kind of uncanny," he said. "A lot of the milestones we've hit are things that he originally outlined."

Ritchie covers health care and technology