

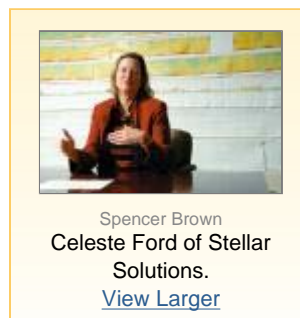
# Stellar Solutions: Aerospace company's growth blasts off

San Francisco Business Times - November 3, 2006 by [Lizette Wilson](#)

Stellar Solutions is growing, but not intentionally.

The Palo Alto firm hiked revenue nearly 20 percent to \$18.7 million last year thanks to deals with the Department of Defense and Lockheed Martin Corp. to tweak satellites, review rocket launch plans and provide other aerospace engineering.

Although CEO Celeste Ford concedes she's pleased with the growth - revenue increased nearly 50 percent since 2003 -- she is most focused on each project's "wow" factor and keeping her cadre of rocket scientists happy and engaged.



"What can happen is you grow for the sake of growing. Not for the quality of the work or the impact you're having," she said. Ford founded the company to step away from what she dubs "pedestrian work" often required from her at larger firms, like COMSAT, the Aerospace Corp. and Scitor Corp. where she helped launch satellites before launching her own company in 1995.

Stellar Solutions' growth was slow initially, gaining speed in recent years as the firm's reputation and name recognition grew.

Roughly 75 percent of revenue now comes from NASA, the DOD and the National Reconnaissance Office. The balance comes from Lockheed.

Now, courtesy of Uncle Sam, that smaller portion is about to get a whole lot bigger.

Last summer NASA selected Lockheed as the prime contractor to design, develop and build the Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle. The spacecraft, which will cost an estimated \$3.9 billion during the first build phase, will serve as an SUV of sorts for space travel. The craft will ferry crews of up to six astronauts -- less if they have lots of gear -- to and from the International Space Station.

The ISS, which has been under construction while orbiting the Earth since 1998, is slated for completion in 2010. Some 124 people have visited it 220 miles above earth, including the five crew members and one tourist there now.

As the build-out continues, the need for easier travel between the ISS and Earth will increase and moving between the station, the moon and Mars will be possible.

Lockheed selected Stellar to be part of the systems engineering team responsible for boosting the mini-shuttle into its low orbit.

Ford declined to detail the financial impact the deal would have on her company, saying simply she was excited about the project.

Orion's first launch with humans on board is slated for 2014.

The total project, including post-development spacecraft delivery orders, is tagged at \$7.4 billion plus \$750 million for sustaining engineering work through 2019, according to NASA.

"We're the big picture people who make sure nothing falls through the cracks," said Ford, noting her firm also assisted NASA during the last Mars mission. "In large projects, there's a lot of people all building different parts in different geographies. We make sure it all works together."

## **Snapshot:**

Company name: Stellar Solutions.

What the company does: Aerospace engineering.

HQ: Palo Alto.

Founders: Celeste Ford.

2006 revenue: More than \$20 million.

2005 revenue: \$18.7 million.

2004 revenue: \$15.8 million.

Founded: 1995.

Employees: 110, including part-time advisers.

Web site: [www.stellarsolutions.com](http://www.stellarsolutions.com)

*Lizette Wilson covers small business for the San Francisco Business Times.*