



## A Hot Entrepreneurial Opportunity

In San Francisco, a business that maintains fire extinguishers requires its own communications lifeline.

As a San Francisco social worker, Akiko Giometti enjoyed helping others improve their lives, but she could never quite shake a long-held dream of running her own business. So while she continued working with homeless youths, getting them started in jobs and careers, Giometti kept her eyes peeled for an entrepreneurial opportunity of her own.

In 2007 she found it. International Fire Inc., a 33-year-old company servicing fire extinguishers for Bay Area government and business clients, was up for sale. To Giometti it looked like the perfect prospect. "There are a lot of exciting programs for minority- and women-owned businesses in the San Francisco Bay Area," she says. "Even without a background in business, this seemed like something I could make work."

Giometti's enthusiasm turned out to be important. Learning a new industry from scratch, she found, can be exhilarating but exhausting. Fortunately, because of her social work Giometti wasn't a total stranger to the machinations of the business world. "I learned a lot about how to network and how to do some business development," Giometti recalls.

### Staying Connected

And through it all, Giometti notes, she was able to rely on AT&T for help with her transition. In fact, she still does. "I use AT&T, first and foremost, for my mobile phone service," Giometti explains. Between visits to current and potential clients, trips to job sites and attending to the myriad details of running a business, sitting at her desk with its office phone is a luxury she gets to enjoy only sporadically. "I'm just mobile," she says. "I'm always moving around, going from one appointment to another and being a mom too." Giometti uses her mobile phone seven days a week to stay in touch with clients, field technicians and her office staff. "I really can't live without it," she says. "It's my lifeline."

For staffers in the office—and for those occasions when she does get to visit her desk—Giometti relies on AT&T office phone service with long-distance calling, as well as AT&T High Speed Internet Business Edition. The broadband connection is invaluable for a variety of tasks, she says: registering with supplier diversity sites; keeping current with regulatory developments at the state fire marshal's Website; researching new business opportunities; maintaining her online calendar; staying in contact with staff and receiving orders from customers by email; and ensuring ready access to her company's Website ([internationalfireinc.com](http://internationalfireinc.com)). "AT&T is a big part of our company's communications capability," Giometti says. "It is quite an important part of our business."

### International Fire Inc. Facts

- **Industry Focus**  
Inspecting and servicing fire extinguishers throughout the San Francisco Bay Area
- **Size**  
Four employees plus half a dozen technician subcontractors who inspect fire extinguishers
- **Business Needs**  
Flexible and reliable communications to stay connected in and out of the office
- **Communications Solutions**  
Wireless and office phone service with long-distance calling, plus AT&T High Speed Internet Business Edition

By offering her customers the same responsiveness and reliability she's come to value from AT&T, Giometti plays an integral part in keeping San Francisco safe from fire. Besides providing fire-protection services for such high-profile clients as the San Francisco International Airport, the Asian Art Museum and Laguna Honda Hospital, International Fire serves the city and county of San Francisco, which operate some 100 municipal buildings. Throw in hundreds more commercial customers, and International Fire is responsible for making sure that approximately 50,000 fire extinguishers throughout San Francisco are charged and ready to perform at any instant.

### Steep Learning Curve

Still, buying and running her own company was unlike anything she'd done as a social worker. "The biggest challenge was the learning curve," she says. "This business of providing and servicing fire extinguishers is very under the radar; it's not a high-profile industry, so anybody coming in from the outside isn't likely to know much about it. At the same time, it's incredibly important for the owners and occupants of any building."

Giometti had a lot to learn: from the ins and outs of her industry and her company's operations to the fundamentals of running a small business. She also needed to study for and pass the required licensing exams to service fire extinguishers. Fortunately, Giometti had help. In addition to inheriting the previous owner's loyal and capable staff of 10 office and field personnel, she was able to draw on the support of her husband,

Mike, another former social worker who now runs an outdoor fitness, or boot camp, business.

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**—Akiko Giometti, Owner, International Fire Inc.**

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Under California law, fire extinguishers in commercial and public buildings must be serviced annually. It is International Fire's job to weigh and inspect them, making sure they are operable and haven't been tampered with. "Quite often, surprisingly, people do tamper with extinguishers, or they might pick them up and use them and not call us," Giometti says. "It's only when we go back for the inspection that we find out there was a little fire in the kitchen, and they used the extinguisher and then just put it back on the wall." In the case of an extinguisher that's no longer serviceable, International Fire can sell the customer a new one. The company also sells fire hoses and related equipment for use in buildings without sprinkler systems.

International Fire might seem a far cry from social work, but the goal is not so different. In her own way, Giometti is still improving the lives of San Franciscans by helping to ensure the safety of the buildings in which they work and play.

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