

ZAP!

Taser manufacturer targets them for personal use

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It's not really a party until someone fires a Taser.

At least, that's Maggie Tyson's philosophy. The suburban Columbus woman recently started a company called Columbus Taser Parties that facilitates gatherings where people can learn about, buy, and even fire a personal Taser. (They practice on a target, not a person.)

Think of it as a Tupperware party for post-9/11 times.

Tasers, which shoot barbed probes that deliver an electric current to incapacitate someone, usually make headlines because of their use in law enforcement, but many don't realize that Taser International, Inc., has been making the brand for the general public since 1994.



These are legal for consumers in Ohio and 42 other states. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

The devices, owned by more than 168,000 civilians in America, are legal for consumers in 43 states, including Ohio. Legislation introduced in Michigan earlier this year aims to add it to the list.

Recent marketing for the product has targeted people interested in personal protection, women in particular. Last year, the manufacturer introduced the Taser C2, a smaller, less expensive model that looks less like a gun and comes in a variety of colors, including red, pink, silver, and leopard print. There's even a holster that includes an MP3 player.

"It doesn't look like you're carrying a weapon of any type. It looks like you're carrying a cell phone or a PDA," said Steve Tuttle, spokesman for the company.

The idea was to make it less intimidating, and Mr. Tuttle said it's worked.

"My 73-year-old mother got one for Christmas," he said. "She loved it. She's self-empowered. She didn't feel like it was threatening to her."

The Taser C2 may look different but it still carries a big shock. Tasers work by firing two tethered probes up to 15 feet away. They attach to an attacker's skin or clothing, then jolt the person with an electrical charge of 1,200 volts to incapacitate them.

The consumer version, which uses a single-shot, replaceable cartridge, differs mainly from the one for law enforcement in that it can shock an attacker for up to 30 seconds at a time, allowing the user time to escape the situation. Law enforcement models allow five-second bursts to subdue suspects.

For Michigan State Rep. Rick Jones, one of the sponsors of the legislation to permit the use of the devices for self-protection in the Wolverine State, it's just common sense to allow citizens a less-than-lethal option to protect themselves.

"You're already able to use a pistol with bullets," said the Republican from Grand Ledge. "Certainly we should give you the option of using electricity in a modern device."

If the legislation passes - and the former sheriff has pledged to help by allowing himself to be Tasered in front of the committee considering it - Mr. Jones said users would come under the same regulations as a handgun owner and would require a concealed pistol license.

In Ohio, no special license is necessary. Customers, who must be at least 18, can simply walk into a store like Cleland's Outdoor World on Airport Highway and buy a Taser C2, which comes with a training DVD.

The store started carrying models with laser sights about a month ago. They sell for around \$350, as opposed to base units that cost about \$300.

Store owner Theresa Cleland said she believes Tasers are a viable alternative for people who want to defend themselves but have reservations about or aren't sufficiently trained in using lethal weapons.

"Not everyone is interested in carrying a gun," she said. "We have a lot of women that need to be taking care of themselves and elderly people are very often targets. ... It takes a considerable amount of skill for a handgun to be useful."

Tom Urbanski, president of Ski's Firearms Training in Oregon, said he shows Tasers in his concealed carry firearms training classes as an alternative too. He said he typically sells one or two a month.

"What I find the Taser being sold for more is for home defense," he said.

Mrs. Tyson, of Columbus Taser Parties, said she was inspired to start her business by the convergence of two things: media reports of a woman organizing Taser parties in Arizona and a friend who was considering buying a gun.

"Just the thought of this really sweet girl getting a gun ... in my view, [using it] would ruin her life," she said. "Whether a person shoots to kill or shoots and causes a serious injury, he or she must live with that for the rest of his or her life."

Amnesty International is quick to point out that numerous people have died as a result of an encounter with a police Taser. The group has counted more than 290 such deaths in the United States since June, 2001 - 19 in Ohio and six in Michigan. One took place in Toledo in 2005.

While some who died had drugs or alcohol in their system and others had pre-existing health conditions, the fact that people are dying after being Tasered should give people pause, said Dori Dinsmore, Midwest regional director for Amnesty International USA.

"There isn't any independent research out there about what makes some individuals vulnerable," she said.

Moreover, there remain questions about appropriate use of Tasers by police and whether they are being used as a last resort or for routine compliance. The thought of a Taser being abused in a fit of road rage by a private citizen could be even more frightening to some.

"There are certainly lots of opportunities for civilians to utilize Tasers in ways that could lead to concern by the general public about under what circumstances someone might pull a Taser on them," Ms. Dinsmore said.

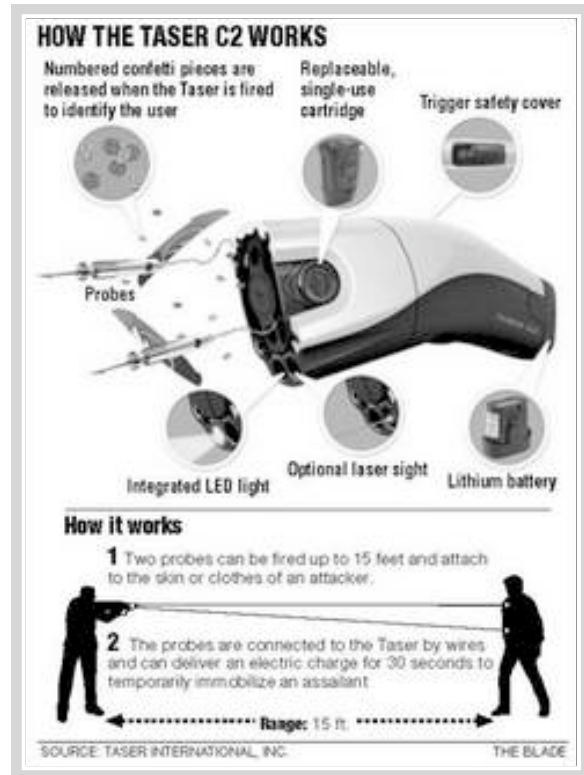
The manufacturer says it has taken numerous precautions to discourage such behavior. Anyone who buys a personal Taser must submit to a felony background check before it can be activated. Then, any time it is fired the Taser disperses 20 to 30 serialized pieces of confetti so that it can be tracked back to the user in cases of misuse.

Sam Faulkner, a law enforcement training specialist with the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, said he doesn't have a problem with civilians using Tasers for self defense, especially since they are more effective than stun guns in stopping assailants. A negative for many people, though, could be cost.

"It is more expensive," he said. "There's no question about it."

Pepper spray can sell for under \$10 and stun guns for under \$20.

Toledo Police Chief Mike Navarre said he is a firm believer in Tasers for use in law enforcement. Every Toledo



street officer carries one. When it comes to putting them in the hands of regular citizens, though, he urged some caution. It might provide a false sense of security since people can lose weapons in a struggle with an assailant and have them used against them, he said.

"I don't know that I would be in a position that I would recommend that anyone use any kind of weapon," he said. "We try to educate people to be very alert to their surroundings, take precautions by locking their doors, keeping exterior lights on, and keeping phones nearby."

"If people do choose to carry weapons," Chief Navarre continued, "if they're less than lethal ... I would caution them to make sure that they know the capability of that weapon and take the time to train."

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