

Home repairs simplified

Some companies bringing order to the business

By Dana Flavelle

Steve Caldwell was in greeting cards and then health products before he decided handyman services were the wave of the future.

He saw a market filling up with seniors and busy two-income families who didn't have the time, skills or ability to fix up their own homes.

And he knew many of them were unsure where to find good, reliable help.

"A lot of seniors have been burned," Caldwell said.

That's why he decided to buy a Mr. Handyman franchise for the Kitchener-Waterloo area, to try to bring some quality and reliability to this highly unorganized sector.

While the home renovation and repair market in Canada slowed considerably during the recession, industry experts say the country's housing stock is aging. And the longer-term demographic trends, especially the rise of the dual-income family, mean fewer homeowners are do it yourselfers.

They want people to "do it for me."

Greg Peterson is a business consultant whose clientele includes a lot of home renovation and construction companies. He noticed many were facing insurmountable challenges when it came to growing their business.

Home renovation contractors find it difficult to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, so end up competing on price, he says. And they can't afford advertising or professional sales or administrative staff, so they get stuck relying on word of mouth referrals.

That's why he and his business partner created Renovantage, an Oakville-based company that



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Ed Pereira works on a deck in Waterloo for Mr. Handyman, a Waterloo franchise, under the watchful eye of Tasmin Brown.

certifies and aims to simply the home renovation process both for the customer and the contractor.

One of his first members, Archer Construction Group Ltd., says it's now booked for the next five months with leads generated by Renovantage.

Meanwhile, Paul Sorrentino decided while running his own professional home cleaning company that there was a need for a single web-based software program that would track everything from scheduling to accounting to product orders.

The result was Centah, a Richmond Hill-based company that sells work order management systems mainly to retailers that provide home improvement services or require repairs and maintenance to their own facilities.

Outside of electricians and plumbers, the home renovation and repair business is largely unregulated and unorganized.

Perhaps that's one reason it ranks second highest on the list of top 10 consumer complaints in Ontario, just below collection agencies, according to the provincial Ministry of Consumer Services.

Few people know where to find

a reliable service person, Sorrentino says.

They turn to the internet or a newspaper ad or a neighbour, Caldwell says, but if something goes wrong, the repairperson may just "disappear."

Things aren't much better on the contractor side of the business, says Renovantage's Peterson.

Few jobs come in on time or on budget while homeowners dither over cabinet tops and tiles, he says.

All three of these companies has built their business around the idea consumers want to deal with recognized brands that

provide some kind of guarantee, while generating leads for contractors and helping them work more efficiently.

Centah operates in the background connecting consumers with contractors through major national retailers. The customer gets the satisfaction of knowing the retailer will back the job. The retailer gets a more efficient way of managing its home service business. And the tradesperson gets referrals, Sorrentino says.

"The majority of trades people are great at working with their hands. But organizing themselves, getting to jobs on time, is a big challenge," Sorrentino says.

Renovantage charges contractors a monthly fee for a basket of services that include referrals, access to architectural and interior design services, estimating software and a décor centre where customers can pick all their finishes before the job begins, Peterson says.

Mr. Handyman charges consumers \$80 an hour for its services, mainly small household repairs, but says its "technicians" are highly trained to burn through your job quickly and guarantee them for a year, Caldwell said.

"The handymen love it. We book the jobs, give them a schedule each day where they're supposed to go," he says.

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