

Wheels seal the deal on shutters

BY: JEAN GRUSS | EDITOR/LEE-COLLIER

A Port Charlotte entrepreneur is using a showroom on wheels to help seal the deal installing hurricane-shutters in this shaky economy.

When Harris Bowers started his hurricane-shutter installation company shortly after Hurricane Charley in 2004, he peddled his wares in a suitcase.

Today, he shows up in a brightly painted van he calls a "hurricane defense vehicle" with flashing lights, a flat-screen TV hooked up to a laptop computer and full-scale samples of shutters and screens.

Bowers' company, Forcefield Hurricane Protection Systems, is one of several hurricane-shutter installation firms that proliferated after the devastating hurricanes of 2003 and 2004.

But Bowers doesn't make customers schlep to a warehouse showroom and he doesn't bring them tiny samples of aluminum shutters. Instead, he arrives at customers' homes and businesses with a 22-foot-long van that has been converted into showroom on wheels.

The van is a one-stop shop that helps him close the sale in a single visit. Bowers can measure a home's openings, customize a bid on a laptop, swipe a customer's credit card and notarize a building permit. As a result, he's more likely to close a sale faster than his competitors. "Efficiency is everything," Bowers says.



Harris Bowers, president and founder of Forcefield Hurricane Protection Systems, is franchising his hurricane-shutter installation company. The company's "hurricane defense vehicle" doubles as a showroom. Todd Matasek is director of operations for Forcefield.

Bowers compares the shutter-installation business to the videotape industry before Wayne Huizenga started Blockbuster Video. It's an industry with a large share of mom-and-pop operators ripe for consolidation and branding.

Forcefield has been a survivor in an industry that has seen its share of failures as the homebuilding industry collapsed and hurricanes disappeared for three years. For example, Fort Myers-based Rolsafe International recently ceased operations and surrendered its assets to its lender, National City Bank.

Now, Bowers says he has perfected his business to the point where he believes he can franchise Forcefield Hurricane. He launched franchise sales earlier this year at the Miami franchise expo.

"I always wanted to get into franchising," Bowers says. "I've made several people very wealthy and had nothing to show for it except a paycheck."

Building the force

Bowers isn't new to franchising. The Philadelphia native owned a Mr. Transmission franchise in Bradenton from 1986 to 1994, but he exited before car-makers' extended warranties killed the business. "I closed it," he says. "It was time to get out."

But Bowers learned some valuable lessons as a franchisee. Among them: Some franchisors treat franchisees like a bad customer instead of a valued partner. For example, when he owned the Mr. Transmission shop, franchisees were required to use the franchisor's in-house advertising agency and pay inflated fees.

REVIEW SUMMARY

Company: Forcefield Hurricane Protection Systems

Industry: Hurricane-shutter installation

Key: Profits come when you get it right the first time.

Forcefield has its own advertising agency now too, called Forcefield Media Associates. But this agency works for the franchisees and passes them the typical agency discounts. "Our goal is not to make money on our franchisees' advertising," Bowers says.

After closing the Mr. Transmission store, Bowers became a vice president with an environmental firm, working with municipal wastewater treatment plants. Bowers learned how to bid on municipal work, a skill that has landed him hurricane-shutter business for fire stations and other government buildings.

In 2004, Bowers was living in Punta Gorda when Hurricane Charley hit the area as a Category-5 storm. Tired of screwing plywood over his windows, Bowers asked three companies to give him quotes for metal shutters. He says the service was so bad he decided the opportunity was ripe for creating his own hurricane-shutter installation company, even though he knew nothing about the business.

Forcefield van comes to you

Bowers initially started his shutter-installation business from his home, with two file cabinets and a wooden plank to make a shelf. He placed some ads in the local papers and peddled shutter samples in a suitcase.

"I made a lot of mistakes in my first two years," Bowers recalls. "I measured wrong, I priced wrong, I ordered wrong."

But those early and costly mistakes proved crucial. That's because Bowers says he learned that the secret to making profits in the business was to make the sale with one visit and not to make any mistakes in measuring and ordering the materials. When you make a mistake on a \$12,000 custom order, "you learn real, real fast."

The key is to train sales staff he calls "safety consultants" to properly measure and order the materials the customer needs on the first visit. The consultant shows up at the customer's house in a turbo-charged Dodge diesel van with flashing strobe lights. The lights attract attention from nosy neighbors who might later become customers.

The rear of the van contains full-sized shutter samples that customers can crank, roll or pull while the consultant walks around the house and measures the dimensions of the windows and doors. The van has seven feet of headroom, a couch and a large-screen TV that shows a short video of the company while the consultant enters dimensions in a laptop. The walls are adorned with the company's licenses and plaques, including one from the Better Business Bureau.

Credibility "is what's important in this business," Bowers says. "We're not selling pizzas here."

Then, based on the customer's preferences and the dimensions of the windows and doors, the computer calculates the estimated cost, which is projected on the flat-screen TV. If the customer believes it's too expensive, the consultant can change the materials on any of the home's openings at the click of a button to change the price.

Once the customer is satisfied with the price, the consultant can swipe a credit card on the credit-card machine next to his laptop to collect a deposit. All consultants are also notaries, so they can obtain the customer's signature to obtain the building permit that is necessary to start work.

While Bowers won't say what percentages of sales are closed on a consultant's first visit with the van, he says it's more than twice as successful as when he used to show up with a suitcase of samples.

Building the Forcefield franchise

Bowers says he's had some good response to the initial franchise launch at the beginning of the year, though one deal has already been felled by the credit crisis. "We had somebody who was ready and they couldn't get financing," he says.

But Bowers himself has built the business on his own, using credit cards and personal savings. Since August, he says sales have risen every month except December. "We're ahead of '06 right now," Bowers says. He won't reveal sales numbers, but disclosed healthy 54% gross profit margins.

Because each home's shutter installation is custom made, the cost can range from \$3,000 to \$40,000. However, Bowers says shutters for the average house add up to \$8,000 or \$9,000. The cost of materials such as aluminum has declined recently, allowing him to offer discounts of as much as 20% recently.

Forcefield may benefit from the downturn in corporate profits as laid-off workers seek to become entrepreneurs. The franchise costs \$84,000, which includes a one-time franchise fee of nearly \$30,000 and a down payment on a \$40,000 van, among other things.

The beauty of the van is that it doubles as the franchisee's showroom and it's cheaper than leasing space in a store. What's more, all the work is custom-ordered so there's no need to lease much warehouse space, cutting costly overhead.

Bowers established Forcefield University, a two-week training class for franchisees to train employees. In addition, customer calls come into Bowers' own call center so that franchisees can focus on sales instead of manning the phones.

In addition to working on homes, Forcefield also has diversified to commercial and municipal buildings. The company recently won a \$42,000 bid to install shutters on three Pinellas County fire stations.

To get customers, Bowers says radio spots have proven to be the most effective medium. He's enlisted the help of satisfied clients, picking them up with stretch limousines and treating them to a buffet lunch at a recording studio.

The customers speak glowingly about Forcefield's service in an unscripted way. "I can't do that in print," he says.

Eventually, Bowers hopes to sell 150 to 200 franchises from the coast of Texas to Maine. The greater frequency of intense hurricanes, stricter building codes and insurance requirements to fortify homes all work in his favor.

"Hurricanes come regardless of the economy," Bowers says.

