

SATURDAY STAR

CLOUDY WITH A THUNDERSTORM. HIGH 20C (WEATHER MAP ON S8) • thestar.com • SATURDAY, MAY 14, 2011



GLENN LOWSON FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Ed Pereira works on a deck in Waterloo for the local franchise of Mr. Handyman, a contractor-for-hire service specializing in minor household repairs.

Home REPAIR RENOVATION

More services link homeowners with contractors

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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 or skills 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."

So now companies are trying to connect not just consumers with handymen, but handymen with consumers.

Now that spring is in the air, many home renovation and repair companies are out looking for your business. They're calling you at home during dinner to say they'll be in your area next week or tucking flyers into your mailbox.

RENOVATIONS continued on B3

Firms help homeowners find reliable contractors

RENOVATIONS from B1

They have few other options for marketing themselves — outside of electricians and plumbers, the home renovation and repair business is largely unregulated and unorganized.

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

But those in the industry face their own steep challenges when it comes to growing their businesses.

Greg Peterson is a business consultant whose clientele includes a lot of home renovation and construction companies.

Home renovation contractors find it difficult to differentiate themselves in the marketplace so they end up competing on price, he says. And they can't afford advertising or professional sales or adminis-

trative 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 certifies contractors and aims to simplify the home renovation process for both customers and contractors.

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 home-cleaning company that there was a need for a web-based software that would track everything from scheduling to accounting to product orders using one program.

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.

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 contractor may just "disappear."

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

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

All three of these companies are built around the idea that consumers want to deal with recognized brands that provide some kind of guarantee. And they all generate leads for contractors and help them work more efficiently.

Centah operates in the background, connecting consumers with contractors through major national retailers, Sorrentino says. 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.

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

Renovantage charges contractors

a monthly fee for a basket of services that includes referrals, access to architectural and interior design services, estimating software and a decor 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 jar quickly and guarantees them for a year, Caldwell said.

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

Whatever service you choose, the provincial consumer ministry recommends homeowners rely on referrals from friends and neighbours, get three estimates and check their references.

Keep deposits to a minimum (about 10 per cent) and avoid estimates that are "too good to be true." Fly-by-night operators may disappear with your cash, the ministry says.

The ministry suggests checking its consumer beware website for complaints, and also the Better Business Bureau and local chambers of commerce.