

Kitchen Retrofit A company designed for a niche consumer market

By Marte Yerkins - President of Casemarte, Inc.

The vision of this new business is to provide a specific service that is not currently defined as a category under the broad range of home renovation. There are companies that replace kitchens (kitchen dealers and home remodelers) companies that improve the appearance of kitchens (face-lifters that install new doors, drawers and countertops) and plumbers who can upgrade sinks and appliances. What I've found lacking is a company that specializes in the functional parts of a kitchen: the drawers, doors and other various components that are mechanical and wear out faster than anything else. Advances in wood materials and finishes in the past 20 years have enabled cabinets, if reasonably maintained, to keep a decent appearance. This means that the cabinets can outlast the hardware that makes them function day after day. Homeowner's complaints usually focus on a drawer that sticks or doors that sag rather than their cabinets falling apart or the finish wearing off. I believe that if consumers could find and hire a specialist who could upgrade the hardware and install convenience products, there would be significant potential for a growing business.

Retrofits for cabinets that are fairly new

If you look at developments that were built prior to the housing collapse in 2008 you'll see properties with huge homes on them. This was the trend because mortgages were cheap and the extra funds could purchase more square footage. At the same time, the typical floor plan changed to where the kitchen was centerpiece of the home and no longer a walled -in room in the back corner of the house. Emphasis on cabinet appearance became important and a lot of cabinets were needed to fill the wide-open gathering space. Despite the abundant square footage and available financing, compromises were often necessary to keep the house within budget. The kitchen, being the most expensive room in the house, was the easiest place to trim costs by downgrading the options and settling for basic amenities. This meant, for example, that instead of having solid maple drawers with full extension drawer slides, the homeowner worked with the builder and accepted a cabinet line with particle board drawers, basic drawer slides and fixed shelves in the base cabinets instead of roll-out trays. These changes alone could shave \$2,000 - \$3,000 off a typical kitchen installation. Again, the overall appearance of the kitchen looked good and that was the priority. So, after as little as five years of continuous use, the inexpensive drawer hardware breaks down, the inconvenience of getting down on hands and knees to access the bottom cabinets is a pain and hearing the cabinet doors slam or squeak makes the situation more aggravating.

Time for an upgrade

Fortunately, since the early nineties a lot of standardization came about in the cabinet industry in terms of hardware applications. This means that some of the newest innovations can be easily retrofitted into existing cabinets where old hinges and drawer slides can be replaced with heavy-duty models having the latest soft-close motion. Hardware companies have invented many devices, which provide convenient access to the farthest depths of cabinets and systems for organizing cutlery, spices, plates, bottles and pots and pans. These products can be retrofitted to existing cabinets, but only individuals who know cabinet hardware inside and out have the knowledge and resources to do it correctly. Sure, handy DIY's can replace and add things themselves but it's not always that simple and you won't find top quality hardware, nor all of the latest innovations at the local home center.

Leave it to the professionals

With *Kitchen Retrofit*, my intent is to establish a company that will be recognized as the authority on the function of kitchen cabinets or any type of case goods found in the home or commercial establishment. I have 30 plus years of experience in cabinetmaking and working for Blum, Inc. and Grass America, two of the largest functional cabinet hardware manufacturers in the world, in marketing and product development. I started Casemarte, Inc. in 2008 to return to cabinet manufacturing, be a hardware consultant and work on various private projects. I hold two patents, one for an add-on soft-close device for doors and the other for the Total Light LED lighting system for cabinet shelving. With my background and direction, I believe a formula for a new service business can be realized and turned into a franchised brand.

The markets are there

The initial approach to market will be threefold:

- The first target is the homeowner frustrated with their cabinet's functional situation and wants to have the bells and whistles that they've seen on HGTV or in the home center kitchen displays. They will find us through website advertising and at local events such as home shows and street fairs. Once we're connected and make an appointment we'll make a sales call with our *Sprinter Mobile Showroom*, which will be outfitted with display cabinets providing full-scale examples of the various options available. At public events the *Sprinter Mobile Showroom* will be impressive with its striking vehicle-wrap graphics and will be easy to setup in a parking lot.
- The second segment are individuals who would like to purchase something truly useful for their aging parents, not to mention something that will also increase home value. Mothers can be reluctant to give up their routines of cooking and cleaning as these chores become more challenging so we can at least prevent them from getting down on their knees as they maintain their sense of purpose. Ads in publications catering to the elderly and local newspapers would be appropriate.
- The third market targets real estate professionals. Once they are aware of our services they could advise their clients to make minor investment improvements that would impress potential buyers towards a sale. Joining the local Chamber of Commerce and participating in their events would provide the networking to get started here.

Eye to the future

With the right product knowledge, the right skills and the right marketing savvy, the business plan of *Kitchen Retrofit* has the potential to become an icon of home service companies. As the initial concept begins in Cleveland, NC and gains its experience in the vast housing market of the greater Charlotte area, the lessons learned will refine our process into a comprehensive package that should be ready to franchise within five years. Just as with cars and our own human bodies, everything breaks down and eventually needs attention. The company that can make your kitchen function better than new and proves itself with reliability and integrity will become the leader.

Our motto: *Kitchen Retrofit* – Convenience that won't cost a fortune.