

MOBILE BUSINESSES BRING THE STORE TO YOU

Two-income couples, convenience spur growth in at-home services, from pet care to computer repair.

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Whenever a sleek, white van pulls up in front of a large Cape in Wrentham, Mass., neighbors know that this is grooming day for the family's two dogs, Marley and Toy.

The van tells the story: Cheerful images of dogs and children decorate the sides, along with intriguing words: Zoomin Groomin and Mobile Pet Spa. Inside, state-of-the-art equipment enables groomers to wash, dry, and clip pets of all sizes.

"It offers a very peaceful environment," says Donna Sheehey, who bills herself as chief dog officer, or CDO, of Zoomin Groomin. "Pets think they're home the whole time."

"Have van, will travel" is becoming the mantra for a growing number of mobile businesses, both independent and franchised, whose colorful vehicles snake through cities and suburbs, delivering products and services to time-short customers. Specially outfitted vans offer new opportunities for mobility in everything from pet pampering to paper shredding, computer repair, auto detailing, and windshield replacement. Doctors may no longer make house calls, but entrepreneurs do, aided by cellphones, [global positioning systems](#), and the Internet.

Seven percent of franchises now have mobile and vehicle-based operations, according to a survey by FRANData for the International Franchise Association. Their ranks have increased in the past decade, spurred by two-income households and a gradual aging of the population, says Darrell Johnson, president of FRANData.

For customers, the advantages are obvious. "It's convenience," says Scott Walker, president of Screenmobile in Thousand Palms, Calif., a mobile franchise that builds window screens on site. "The customers we're dealing with are getting used to having things come to their doorstep. Their time is so valuable that they'd rather go play golf ... than do a household repair themselves."

Older people also appreciate at-home services, Ms. Sheehey says. Some of her customers have elderly pets that would be hard to transport to a grooming salon.

Speed is another advantage. "Usually, if the service is performed on-site, it gets done faster than if the customer has to take something somewhere," says David Urban, professor of marketing at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

Convenience costs: At Zoomin Groomin, prices range from \$60 to \$90. "It's definitely a premium service," Ms. Sheehey says.

But Xavier Lanier, a writer in San Francisco who runs a mobile technology website, www.notebooks.com, calls time "our most valuable asset."

"You have to look at the gap between what it would cost to take your things somewhere and what it costs for this service," he says. "It's important to factor in the dollar value of your own time when considering this." Gas and parking also add up.

His "absolute favorite" convenience is a mobile laundry service. He goes to the website, www.sfwash.com and requests a pickup date. The truck returns the laundry the same day or within 24 hours. The cost is \$1.10 a pound, compared with 80 cents a pound at a neighborhood laundry.

"We used to spend a good chunk of each Saturday morning doing laundry," Mr. Lanier says. Now he and his wife, Amisha, go to brunch or spend time with friends. "To us, paying the premium for the laundry service more than covers our additional free time together. These home services reduce the stress of either buying or servicing things."

Mobile computer repair has also become popular. Andy Trask, "head geek" of [Geek Housecalls](#) in Boston, an independent business, says, "It's clear from the customers who come to us that they're not entirely satisfied with the conventional model – pack up your computer, take it to the store, and kiss it goodbye for a few days."

Dana Korey, owner of Away With Clutter, an organizing company in San Diego, hires a mobile shredding firm to shred papers her clients no longer need.

For mobile franchise owners, a van-based business has low start-up costs and overhead. "Even at \$3 for a gallon of gas, it still beats \$30 or \$40 per square foot, plus utilities, in a strip mall," says Tom Scarda, a franchise consultant in Wantagh, N.Y.

Mr. Scarda uses a mobile veterinarian for his dogs. "She comes to my home with a step-in van so well equipped she can perform some very technical operations," he says. Last week he met an optometrist who travels to homes and offices to fit customers for glasses.

Walker describes a typical mobile franchise owner as a man in his 40s or 50s, though some are younger, some older. "They need a lifestyle change and are looking to do something different. They may be part of a corporate downsizing. Or they may just have different goals now."

Sheehey favors business people for her Norwell, Mass.-based firm. They pay a \$29,000 franchise fee for one territory and can lease a \$65,000 van for \$1,200 a month.

This growing industry is not just for baby boomers, says Dick Rennick, president of American Leak Detection in Palm Springs, Calif. "People are getting into mobile franchising in their 50s, 60s, and 70s. Age isn't a barrier the way it once was."

Another enthusiast, Genma Stringer Holmes, a business owner and mother of three in Nashville, Tenn., offers three suggestions for consumers considering a mobile service: Get lots of references. Don't turn over keys until you have established a comfortable relationship. Pay by credit card.

For Urban, the main questions are the same as for any service business: Will the quality be consistent, and will people show up when they say they will?

When the answer is yes, Ms. Holmes calls these services "manna from heaven."

She adds, "From mobile oil changes to the young man who keeps my business trucks clean to the groomer who parks outside and gives my mutts a flea dip, this is the only way for me at this point."