

Service: Resisting recession with a business on wheels

ESCONDIDO ---- Owning a business on wheels is proving a practical way to ride out this recession for Dwight Stratton, the longtime Escondido owner of a Screenmobile Corp. franchise.

"We refer to our truck and trailer as our mobile billboard," said Dwight Stratton while he stood outside the San Marcos home of a client in need of custom window screens on a recent weekday morning.

His trailer ---- a store and workshop on wheels ---- is decorated with the business name, telephone number and an oversize sign with the words, "America's Neighborhood Screen Stores."

For 20 years, Stratton has weathered Southern California's economic ups and downs with his low-overhead business installing traditional and custom window, patio and door screens.

His office is his Escondido home, and supplies are shipped to and stored at a warehouse in nearby San Marcos.

"The first go-round, I was just starting out," he said, referring to the 1990-91 recession that clobbered the state's economy.

"I was still learning. I was working by myself. I survived," Stratton said.

He now has two employees, and his co-owner and wife, Kathy, keeps the books.

But he is capitalizing on two recent trends ---- 'going green' and 'staying put' ---- that he said are helping sales stay up in this down economy.

Homeowners reluctant to sell their houses for a bigger edition in the battered real estate market are fueling more screen sales.

"A lot of people right now, instead of planning to move up, are saying, 'Let's stay put and fix it up,'" said Stratton, whose average annual revenue is in the \$250,000 range.

At the same time, more homeowners are asking for sun-control screens on windows as a conservationist decision, as a financial move to whittle down costly summer utility bills, or for both reasons, he said.

"We have sun control products that will reduce heat build-up, and yet, you still get visibility," he said. "I think going green certainly is the issue."

Stratton also cited the extra cushion in any economy of having the outside corporate "how- to" support and brand-name recognition offered by a franchise.

Thousand Palms-based Screenmobile is a family-owned franchisor with 91 locations and revenue of \$15 million to \$20 million a year, according to the company.

When people move to the region from other states, Stratton, 74, said they call him because they already are familiar with the Screenmobile.

The how-to support is what convinced Stratton to buy a franchise versus starting his own business after a 30-year career in banking, he said.

Stratton followed around a friend with a Screenmobile franchise in the Bay Area before making his decision in late 1988 to go with the screen store on wheels.

His advice for others considering starting their own is to be sure to do research on the franchise.

The switch from finance to fixing window screens made sense for him.

Standing under a bright sun by his trailer in short sleeves, Stratton said that he is happy about trading a banker's business suits for a "fresh air" career.



Dwight Stratton, right, owner of Screen Mobile, on site with employee Kyle Wynne in San Marcos on Monday. (Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - Staff Photographer)

"I thoroughly enjoy it," he said.