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THESE COMPANIES MAKE HOUSE CALLS

BYLINE: Joe Blundo, Dispatch Home Reporter

BODY:

Window screens repaired while you wait? We don't have time for that. And so the window screen shop will come to us, as will the furniture repair shop and the appliance touch-up shop. A small army of mobile fix-it franchises is creeping into Columbus, with names such as Screenmobile, Surface Doctor and Furniture Medic. Their target market, along with seemingly everyone else's target market, is busy baby boomers with an urge to remodel.

"It's the same trend that's fueling the Home Depots, the Lowe's, the other home improvement stores," said Steven Hoff, director of franchise development for Surface Doctor, based in Atlanta. "Cocooning. The aging of the baby boomers. Two-income families." Much of what these companies do once might have been done by a handyman. But where the old-time handyman was a general practitioner, these new companies are specialists. "(Customers) have asked us to do other jobs while we were there, and we tell them we're like brain surgeons. We do screens - that's all," said Marilyn Kulp, who with her husband, Jim, operates the local Screenmobile franchise. Mr. Kulp is a former manager for a vending machine company who wanted to work for himself. Two years ago, he and his wife bought a franchise from Screenmobile, a California corporation with 65 franchisees. Screenmobile makes and repairs window and door screens on site. The company also installs pet doors, screen guards and screens for sliding patio doors. It costs about \$ 18 to replace a window screen, about \$ 28 to make a new one. Replacement screens for a sliding patio door start at about \$ 35. Mr. Kulp acknowledges that his services are more expensive than what a screen shop would charge. On the other hand, he said, he can make a screen for almost any window, on site. "If (the window) is way off, I'll actually make a crooked screen to fit," Mr. Kulp said. On a recent weekday, Mr. Kulp was at the Bexley home of Maureen Reedy and Tom Griffin, making screens to fit the replacement windows that had just been installed. It takes him about 20 minutes to construct a screen - he made screens for all 17 windows in the Bexley house that day. Reedy said she was pleased with the results. "I like them. The view is unobstructed, and they seem nice and firm." She said she would recommend Screenmobile. Are there actually enough people with screen needs to support a business like this? "It's amazing, actually," Mrs. Kulp said. "We started getting booked up in February. During winter months, a lot of window companies call us. During summer, we are just booked with homeowners." If these same people have nagging water rings on their coffee tables, there's a way to solve that problem, too. Furniture Medic and Guardsman Wood Pro are among franchises

that do in-home repairs on furniture and woodwork. "I had a water spot," said Mary Boyle of the Worthington area. "It was kind of a bad water spot on the table in the front hall, and (the table) was really too big for me to haul to some furniture refinisher." Instead, Boyle called Terry McCreary, who operates a Guardsman franchise in Powell. While McCreary was there, she also had him renew the finish on a coffee table. The total bill was \$ 100, Boyle said. Guardsman is a Grand Rapids, Mich., franchising company that also makes the Guardsman furniture polishes. McCreary, who has owned the franchise since November, said he can also fix dents, scratches, worn finishes, loose joints, loose veneer, claw marks and other pet damage, and minor upholstery flaws. He can reconnect things, like table legs or chair arms, but he can't make new parts if something is beyond repair. The minimum charge for a house call is \$ 75. McCreary said typical customers are middle and upper middle-class people who have furniture worth repairing. Often, they are empty-nest couples who now have time and money to attend to repairs they've been putting off. Sometimes, they've just returned from furniture shopping, where the prices gave them sticker shock. Furniture Medic offers similar furniture services. It and Surface Doctor, which puts new finishes on laminate counter tops and other surfaces, are both the creation of Joe Lunsford, an Atlanta franchiser. Surface Doctor has 113 franchises across the country. The local branch, founded six months ago, is run by Craig and Margie Ottman of Pataskala. Mr. Ottman is a former United Parcel Service manager. Unlike Screenmobile and Guardsman Wood Pro, which specialize in fixing things you once would have had to take to a shop, Surface Doctor fixes things you once might have had to replace. The business repairs and resurfaces laminate counter tops, appliance surfaces, porcelain bathtubs, cabinet fronts and fiberglass shower stalls. In this, Surface Doctor has company - the Yellow Pages list nearly two dozen bathtub refinishers alone. The Ottmans, who do both commercial and residential work, recently were hired by Carnaby Village apartments in Reynoldsburg to repair and repaint counter tops, refinish dark cabinets and resurface some bathtubs. Manager Kathy White said the cabinet refinishing was done for about a fifth of the cost of replacing them. "It almost looks like the cabinets have been re-laminated," White said. "So far, it's held up very well." Mr. Ottman said cabinets are painted with a poly-resin substance that is sprayed on like paint but lasts longer. Surface Doctor guarantees its work for five years. Hoff, the director of franchise development, said a typical Surface Doctor job involves giving a face lift to a 1970s kitchen at a cost of \$ 1,500 to \$ 3,000. The average bath face lift costs \$ 1,000 to \$ 2,000, Hoff said. The Ottmans use a resinous material to patch holes in counter tops. The patch is then sanded smooth and painted to match the counter top. A counter top repair costs \$ 75 to \$ 100, Mr. Ottman said. Cabinet resurfacing costs several hundred. Cleaning a fiberglass shower stall - a notoriously difficult task - starts at about \$ 50. Terri Timura hired Mr. Ottman to clean her mother-in-law's fiberglass shower stall as a birthday present. "He said he thought he could get it clean, and I thought, 'Yeah, right.' Boy, he did. It looks like a brand new shower." Mr. Ottman handled that job, but his role more often is to find new business. It's Mrs. Ottman who does the actual resurfacing. Her specialty is bathtubs. "They call me the bathtub lady," she said.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: , Jennifer Domenick/Dispatch Margie and Craig Ottman of Surface Doctor at work in an apartment. Jeff Adkins/Dispatch Jim Kulp of Screenmobile in a Bexley home.

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