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## Fort Myers company thriving on kitchens

### Refacing cabinets proves a steady job

BY DON MANLEY • [DMANLEY@NEWS-PRESS.COM](mailto:DMANLEY@NEWS-PRESS.COM) • SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

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A business owner's decision not to hitch his wagon to the region's once white-hot building industry is paying big dividends for his small Fort Myers company.

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That choice is a key reason why My Kitchen Magician, which specializes in cabinet refacing - replacing old doors with new ones - as well as installing crown molding and rollout shelves in kitchens, bathrooms and offices, has managed to remain successful as the economy slides downward.

Russ Peterson, the company's owner, opted to limit himself to remodeling jobs when he formed the company four years ago. Referrals from customers and real estate agents have led to a workload that's been more than sufficient to buffer him against the slowing economy's ravages. In fact, he said My Kitchen Magician has been essentially unaffected by the virtual collapse of

the construction industry over the last two years.

Gross sales for the first eight months are off by about 3.5 percent, as compared to the same period in 2007 - \$89,400 compared to \$92,700. However, Peterson and his wife, Victoria, a teacher in the Collier County school district, vacationed for eight weeks this summer, twice as much time as they took last year, and he expects to have exceeded last year's revenue when 2009 draws to a close.

"The volume of work might even be greater than last year," he said. "If I'd been here four of those eight weeks, I'd have topped it."

While the number of jobs has risen, customer expenditures have fallen.

"As people have less disposable income, they're more likely to reface their cabinets than to replace them," he said. "People are always going to want to upgrade their home and for people that are going to sell their home, they better have a nice kitchen. In a tight market, you better have everything you can have and a nice kitchen is a big part of it."

Peterson is essentially a one-man operation, handling sales and marketing, as well as using woodworking skills built up over 37 years in the business.



Russ Peterson of My Kitchen Magician installs a drawer face in a Cape Coral residence Thursday. Peterson's business has been able to thrive despite a sluggish economy. (Stephen Hayford/news-press.com)



Peterson drills a drawer face Thursday for a kitchen refacing project. (Stephen Hayford/news-press.com)

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He owned and operated a cabinet and furniture making business in Virginia for 33 years before selling it when he and his wife moved to Fort Myers in 2003.

He said the businesses, which also included a store, grew too large for his tastes, and eventually led to burnout.

After the move, Peterson began remodeling much of the couple's home in Cross Creek Estates in south Fort Myers. When neighbors saw his work, they requested that he also work his magic at their homes and, soon, a new career was born.

"I was looking for something different and I realized I liked doing what I liked doing. I just wanted to do it in a different way."

The average My Kitchen Magician customer is either a new homeowner, someone who is preparing to sell or someone who simply wants to make a change.

Older homes are generally where he works, but new homes sometimes crop up, such as the kitchen work he did at a four-month-old home this week.

John McWilliams began referring others to Peterson after Peterson worked on his home in Fiddlesticks about a year and a half ago.

"He's great," he said. "He was a magician for us. He transformed our kitchen beautifully. He shows up on time. He's most creative and most important in this world today, trustworthy. His workmanship is flawless and I could highly recommend him."

Smaller jobs, those taking an average of two to four days, comprise the bulk of Peterson's workload. However, he sometimes takes on bigger residential jobs - those taking a week or more - as well as the occasional commercial project.

How does it feel to be not just treading water, but thriving during these difficult times?

"It is great," he said. "I don't want to say it's humbling, but I am very thankful. I do know things are tough.

"I know people are having a hard time. I'm very thankful that things have worked out and it is encouraging to know that I've picked something that works for me and works for my wife."

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