

VENTURA COUNTY STAR

February 16, 2005

Autotouch

Author: mdelatorre

Section: Business and Stocks

Owner: Francis O'Connor.

Type of service: Mobile auto appearance repair.

Where: Based in Silverstrand. Services Oxnard, Ventura, Camarillo and surrounding areas.

Date established: April 1998

Telephone: 805-377-1419

Start-up capital: \$50,000.

Question to Francis O'Connor: Why did you decide to start your own business?

Since coming to the United States from Ireland, I've wanted to own my own business. Every emigrant aspires to fulfill the American dream and I was no exception. Owning my own business makes the American dream a reality for me. I also have an independent personality and prefer to create my own work environment rather than work within a corporate structure.

What was your educational and career background before you started your business? After college, I was a teacher in Ireland. Here in the United States, I managed a picture framing company where I developed my eye for colors. After moving to Ventura County, I worked in the auto appearance repair business. It was then I realized there was an untapped business opportunity in the retail market and decided to start Autotouch.

What do you consider unique about your business? Autotouch provides a bumper to bumper, complete mobile make-over for your car. A person's time is becoming more and more valuable and what I offer is an alternative to losing your car to a body shop for several days. By coming to your home and fixing minor exterior and interior damage, you can rejuvenate the appearance of your car without ever leaving your driveway.

We repair bumper and panel damage, scratches, rock chips, windshields, interiors and much more. With the ability to match over 50,000 paint colors on site and an unlimited range of leather and vinyl colors available, all jobs can be completed in four hours or less. Traditionally, this industry has targeted car dealerships exclusively. Using Autotouch puts the car owner on equal footing with the professionals in the industry.

What business courses or advice have you found to be most valuable in getting your business off the ground and keeping it going? I've found that studying marketing is invaluable to reaching out to potential customers. Also, the hands-on experience of the past few years has given me an insight into the car sales industry. My aim now is to pass on that knowledge and let the average consumer learn the tricks of the trade. Equally important is customer service. As a consumer myself, I believe it to be the cornerstone of any business.

What are your plans for expansion, new products or hiring new employees? Right now, the market is in the development phase. As it grows, I have plans to hire and train new employees. I also intend to expand on the products and services on offer. Rear spoilers, graphics and running boards are examples of some of the merchandise available. New products are coming on the market all the time and people have no idea these can be installed on site in half a day or less.

What were the biggest hurdles you overcame? It is a challenge to develop a market where none existed before. My first task when beginning this business is to educate the consumer and make him or her aware of the auto appearance services I provide.

Who is your target client/customer base? Anyone who owns a car, or is trading one, whether buying, selling or returning a lease, will benefit from this service. A well-kept vehicle increases its value, decreases selling time and extends its future.

What is your strategy to increase market share? Consumer education, consumer education, consumer education. If the consumer is not aware that these services are out there, they will not avail of them. One of my solutions to this is to compile consumer reports on the industry, available to anyone free of charge. I believe that this, combined with a high level of customer service, will increase the customer base.

What kind of competition does your business face? Presently very little. However, as other companies in the industry realize the potential of the individual consumer business, this could change. I believe that quality products and excellent customer service will give me an edge over competitors.

Copyright, 2005, Ventura County Star