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Reno company wrapped up in its plastic product

Upstart Reno company banks on shriveling economy to expand shrink wrap market

Sandra Chereb, Associated Press Writer
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RENO, Nev. (AP) -- Armed with mega heat guns, a small group gathered on a chilly morning taking aim not at the cold but thick plastic sheeting draped over a small mountain of construction pipe.

Guns blazing, they practiced their technique -- long, sweeping strokes -- and quickly learned the consequences of less than fluid motions.

"Uh, oh," said one woman as the sheeting melted into a small hole.

There would be more holes this day, but that didn't puncture the enthusiasm of the new business owners, recruits of Fast Wrap, an upstart Reno company offering franchises.

Though shrink wrap has been around for decades and used mostly to cover boats, Fast Wrap co-founder Mike Enos said use of the plastic protectant product is growing beyond marinas to disaster zones, construction sites and basic backyard uses.

A shrinking economy has created unexpected demand for wrapping some products and heated up interest in acquiring franchises by people looking for jobs or supplemental income, he said.

Ed, Charlene and Carrie Lane of Sacramento, Calif., are hoping to complement their custom homebuilding business.

Ed Lane said business has been slow, and his work lately has been remodeling jobs.

With Fast Wrap, he said, buildings can be sectioned off, isolating construction areas and minimizing dust and debris.

"The possibilities are endless," said Enos, whose business began to take shape 15 years ago when he wanted to cover his own boat, which he uses about two months out of the year. The rest of the time it's in storage.

"Doing the tarp, the Bungee cords, just wasn't working."

A California boat manufacturer told him it provided shrink wrapping service only for boats it made, and when he couldn't find anyone else, he called Dr. Shrink, a Michigan outfit that sells shrink wrapping materials.

For \$1,000, Enos bought his own supplies, wrapped his boat and parked it outside another Reno business he had at the time. Before long, others were asking where they could get it done, too -- not only for boats, but recreational vehicles, outdoor kitchens, anything that needs protection from northern Nevada's harsh elements.

That was in the early 1990s. He and Fast Wrap co-founder Ken Cassas, who spent 20 years in excavating and construction, opened the flagship Fast Wrap in Reno in 2007. In 2008, the company had about \$600,000 in sales, he said.

Since then it has since extended the franchise to eight locations, with three more in the works, in six states -- Nevada, California, Washington, Idaho, Florida and Colorado. Another will open soon in Missouri, Enos said.

Their goal is to have 30 locations by year's end and 500 nationally within five years.

The first 20 new franchise owners can buy into the company at a reduced rate of \$50,000 to \$60,000, depending on location, Enos said. The buy-in includes a week's worth of training at the Reno location, plus a

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day of onsite training, sales leads and all supplies needed to get started -- heat guns, ladders, and rolls of shrink wrap.

On this day, Cassas demonstrated technique to new franchise owners at a local plant, where acres of PVC pipe were piled in a back lot -- a sign of the economic times.

"It's like painting a car, only anyone can do it," Cassas said.

That's debatable, said Tony Seraphin, owner of Global Wrap based in St. Augustine, Fla., with offices in Philadelphia and Monterey, Calif.

Seraphin has been in the shrink wrapping business for nearly three decades and has traveled the world wrapping huge buildings and bridges for construction work and disaster relief efforts.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, Global Wrap enclosed more than 400 buildings to protect whatever remained until repairs could begin, he said.

"We get there right after the wind dies down," he said.

"It's a very difficult business," he said. "When you're talking about a giant bridge or steel structures ... it takes a lot of know-how.

"We have a lot of people who have jumped on our bandwagon," Seraphin said. "We're the only ones that really do this on a national level.

Seraphin said he didn't consider the Nevada upstart competition.

Fast Wrap owners see the mobile, on-demand service as filling a local need and expanding shrink wrap uses.

Garth Harris, who owns a Line-X spray-on coating franchise in Las Vegas and has several casino accounts, sees Fast Wrap as an extension of the services he already provides, applying protective coatings to outdoor furnishings, among other things.

At the Reno plant where PVC pipe is manufactured, the wrapping will extend the life of its product.

"If you leave the pipe exposed, it will be sunburned," said Cantex plant manager Andy Zimmer. "It makes the product unsellable.

"It's not feasible to build a facility to store it inside," Zimmer said. "That's the reason we're using shrink wrap. Wrapping the pipe extends our storage time."

The huge sheets of polyethylene, manufactured by Dr. Shrink, are fire retardant and offer protection from the sun's ultraviolet rays. When heat is applied with 240,000 BTU heat guns the sheeting shrinks about 25 percent, forming a tight coating.

"The tighter you get it, the better," Cassas instructs.

A few weeks earlier, he supervised as Fast Wrap workers sealed the top floors of an air traffic control tower being built at Reno-Tahoe International Airport.

Wrapping the outside scaffolding formed a protective cocoon, allowing the contractor to pump in heat to warm steel beams before applying required fireproofing. Under building codes, the steel must be at least 48 degrees for 48 hours before the coating is applied. It also created a safety barrier for construction workers in the otherwise open air hundreds of feet above the ground.

The same concept is used to make temporary buildings, equipped with zippered doors and windows that are marketed as "same day shade," for special events.

The sheeting comes in rolls as large as 40-feet wide and 149-feet long. For simple wrap jobs, the company charges about \$10 a linear foot. To wrap a 40-foot recreational vehicle, complete with ventilation and zippered access, costs about \$400 -- cheaper than monthly indoor storage rental fees.

Mark Hamill, a Fast Wrap franchise owner in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, said his outfit was contracted by a private tire manufacture.

"Last year they bought hundreds of large truck tires," he said. But as the economy soured, the tires remain unused and were taking up valuable shop space.

"We're shrink wrapping lots of tires," he said.

Enos said Fast Wrap's franchise sales have been enhanced by the down economy.

"They're creating their own work because they have no stability in their jobs."

Robert McKay, a retired marine engineer from Dania Beach, Fla., is going into business with his sons, Kevin and Raymone.

"We can't wait to get going," he said. "I hope to grow this business and put some people to work."

Serge Bonaldo, a civil engineer from Southern California, and his business partner, Fran Natale, are hoping to augment their architectural business and protect its 12-person staff by opening a Fast Wrap franchise.

"We want to try to save them," Bonaldo said of his workers. "We think this is going to take off."

Mike Stenberg, president of Dr. Shrink, said the Fast Wrap franchise is introducing the versatility of the product to the masses. His company supplies materials to outlets in 70 countries, with sales totaling about \$15 million annually, he said.

"Even though shrink wrap has been around 25 to 30 years, there's people who have never seen it," he said.

"We haven't come close to tapping into its potential."

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