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SOUTH JERSEY BUSINESS WORK & SAVE

Voorhees firm fills bathing niche

Tuesday, August 2, 2005

By JEANNE RIDGWAY
Courier-Post Staff
VOORHEES

A couple of baby boomers with backgrounds in health care are making bathtub safety their business. They are part of a growing trend - small businesses tapping into niche markets underserved by building contractors, often using some kind of pre-fab, easy-to-install item.

"Don't Fall - Install" is the motto of TubEZ, a company that remodels standard bathtubs into easy-to-negotiate showers for people with physical limitations.

The concept behind TubEZ, in business for less than two years here, couldn't have been more obvious.

A 10-year veteran of the assisted-living business, Lynn Kohn, 54, was working as a leasing manager when she kept hearing objections to the bathtubs in the living units. "I'll never be able to get in and out of that tub," they would say. "It was my job to fill the building, but the biggest obstacle was the bathtub," said Lynn, a resident of Voorhees, who is now the owner of TubEZ along with her husband, Howard, 62, a former hospital executive.

But Lynn took customer complaints to heart. The average tub is about 15 inches high, and some people with stiff joints and unsteady balance simply can't step in.

While still working for the retirement home, Lynn began searching for plumbers and remodelers who could transform old tubs at the facility into user-friendly showers. But making the change was pricey - about \$4,000 per conversion.

Finally Lynn found a simple, less-costly way to convert a tub into a walk-through shower with no demolition and no new plumbing. The conversion - which requires the bather to take just a six- or eight-inch step - was developed by a company in Utah.

Lynn's research into tub conversions made her an expert in the field and in January 2004 she and Howard founded TubEZ. The Utah company gave TubEZ the license to distribute its products in a designated geographic area, including South Jersey.

In some aspects, TubEZ is an unusual business.

"If you are talking about tub liners, we have competitors," said Lynn. "But in the tub conversion business, there aren't many around."

TubEZ offers several products: the "walk-through" bathtub, the barrier-free shower stall and the standard shower stall. The company also uses custom-fitted acrylic liners to cover old standard tubs and walls.

But it is the TubEZ walk-through bathtub that is the company's unique and least-expensive product, costing \$800 to \$1,000.

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A 22-inch-wide opening is cut through the side of the bathtub, leaving a 6- to 8-inch lip at the floor. The raw opening is finished with a pre-formed polypropylene "saddle" that is sealed into place. The installation is completed in half a day, without dust or fumes, said Lynn. It's ready to use within 24 hours.

All TubEZ products have slip-resistant surfaces.

A consultant on independent living issues for senior citizens and the disabled, Stephanie S. Levin said the bathroom is the most dangerous room in the house, because of all the hard, slippery surfaces.

Levin cringes when her clients tell her they hold onto a shower curtain in order to balance themselves when getting into a tub.

"That's a fractured hip waiting to happen," says Levin, whose company is Resources for Independent Living in Villanova, Pa.

Levin often recommends clients use a transfer bench, a seat that spans the tub's side. The bather sits on the bench and simply slides over into the tub. But she also likes the TubEZ walk-through, along with well-placed grab bars.

"I saw an ad about it somewhere. I thought it was a great idea and a great alternative to offer my clients," she said. "It also saves a lot of money in the long run because you don't have to retrofit the shower area."

For people who use wheelchairs, a barrier-free shower stall may be the only solution, she noted.

During its first year in business, TubEZ has sold and installed 150 units, many of them walk-throughs. Clients include retirement homes and 55-and-older communities such as Fountains at Cedar Park in Winslow, the Evergreens in Moorestown, Cardinal Village in Washington Township, and the Princeton Housing Authority.

Now, through word of mouth, the TubEZ customer base has shifted.

"This year, we've expanded from retirement communities to people's homes," said Howard, who formerly was a human resources executive at Presbyterian Homes and Services in Princeton and Lourdes Medical Center of Burlington County in Willingboro.

Home customers seem to be ordering a mixture of all three TubEZ products, including the barrier-free shower.

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