

Carpet Network keeps driving success to members

DEALERS GET EDUCATED ON GREEN TO HELP CUSTOMERS

By Matthew Spieler

Since its founding in 1991, The Carpet Network shop-at-home van franchise has maintained a relatively low profile, popping up in the press news now and then, such as its first national convention in 1996, but mostly going about its business of making its members profitable and successful in their markets.

Just a quick look will say this under-the-radar philosophy has worked. Members enjoy a repeat referral business averaging over 70%, and once they join, they rarely leave.

"Carpet Network is the best organization I've seen," said Jan Vanderspek of Eugene, Ore., and a 50-year industry veteran who joined the franchise about nine years ago. "The management really stands behind the people. They don't push. They want people, not numbers and don't just open up anywhere with anyone. They are very particular with who signs up. They also provide excellent backup and training

support and have formed excellent relations with the suppliers."

Dave Fitzwater of South Burlington, Vt., who has been in the industry 35 years and with Carpet Network for almost 10, added the training and tools the franchise offers are invaluable.

He noted at the buying group's most recent meeting, the convention was focused on helping the membership get a better understanding of the environmental movement. From having industry executives come in to discuss how their companies fit into the trend to the specific green features and characteristics of the products they offer, as well as understanding how to market/position themselves without greenwashing, "it was overwhelming. We got bombarded with information. I felt beat up afterward."

But in a good way, he quickly added. "We did a home show shortly after and were able to answer questions and help educate the attendees. It was a very satisfying event and Carpet Network did a great job getting

us prepared."

Carpet Network even created a special backdrop display for members to use when participating in local events. Vanderspek called it "beautiful. I will certainly take advantage of using it when I do my next show. Green is a very big deal in this part of the country. Our local paper even has a section to run green products."

He noted Mohawk's carpet made from recycled soda bottles is a big hit for him. "I've been selling it for quite a few years. Also cork and other products that have green attributes. The mills have been very supportive as well."

When it comes to selling green, or anything for that matter, Vanderspek said there is a reason 95% of his business comes from referrals. "I have no unhappy customers. I concentrate on service. I work with them, listen to them and see what they need. I never push any product. Rather, after listening and talking, I show some selections based on her needs

and make myself available to answer any questions and help her make a choice she will love."

Fitzwater said he used the backdrop at his recent home show and combined it with



Lenny Rankin, Carpet Network's founder, with the eco-designed booth display the company created for members to use when they attend local home shows.

Natural Cork on the booth floor along with a continuous video showing Shaw's environmentally friendly Epic hardwood.

"Customers are asking about green," he said. "And they were especially impressed with the cork after walking on it. In Vermont people are green minded; it's very important to them. But the biggest challenge is the building industry. They really don't understand it and we need to educate them. And Carpet Network does a great job with that."

Knowing who you are

While Lenny Rankin, Carpet Network's founder, is appreciative of the credit members give the group, he feels the reason for its success is it understands what it means to be a shop-at-home flooring retailer.

"Shop-at-home is a great buzzword but those who have tried getting into it don't really understand the concept," he told FCNews. "I still feel that shop-at-home is not perceived properly."

Rankin noted how most go after Empire Carpet or Home Depot and he gives credit to the former for creating an awareness of the benefits of shopping from the comfort of one's home, but "our biggest competitor is really the better specialty stores in each market."

Considering a typical Carpet Network van carries over 100 carpet binders, plus commercial folders, and a complete assortment of wood, tile, laminate, resilient, cork, rugs window coverings and more, he said one vehicle is literally a store on wheels brought right to the consumer's front door. "We carry as much in a van as any dealer in his brick-and-mortar store."

With 35 members in 18 states, Rankin said 2008 is the

first year the franchise is actively seeking growth. "We'd like to add 10 new members this year. It's tough to sell in this climate, but we have a solid track record and are consistently ranked as one of the best franchises in the country."

Green education

With the green movement in the public's eye, Rankin said he thought it was important for the membership to not only learn about it but feel comfortable selling it. Like the Internet, where Carpet Network was one of the first to maintain an active Web site, he wanted to make sure his members were at the forefront of something that will only grow in importance.

"Consumers want to learn about green but don't necessarily want to buy because of bad experiences or because they feel the stores they visited gave them a bunch of misinformation," he explained. "Our owners are getting questions and inquiries from consumers—they're curious and want to know their options."

So Carpet Network set about to make sure both its membership and the public get as much knowledge as possible. Beyond the internal training and marketing, the group has set up a special green Web site for consumers "to just get educated." From a glossary of terms that is constantly updated, to explanations of what green features a product has, to links to third-party sources to gain more information, the Web site, www.aboutgreenfloors.com, is pushing knowledge, not sales.

But, knowledge is power and Carpet Network is seeing a rise in eco-friendly sales. "Our members are more cognizant of green and more comfortable selling and explaining it," Rankin said, "and the consumer can see she is not getting greenwashed so there is a trust factor."

In the end, he noted, creating and nurturing trust and respect—whether it is between buying group and vendors, corporate and the franchisees or membership and consumers—is one of the biggest factors to Carpet Network's success. "People know when you are feeding them...a line. We are always upfront and straight with everyone."

Vanderspek concurred. "I couldn't be more happy with Carpet Network. They are very helpful with whatever you want to you, and if they don't know the answer they will do everything they can to find it for you."

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