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BALANCING ACT

Mobile businesses cater to a harried society

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By CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN
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Who among us wouldn't appreciate the convenience of having our dog groomed in our driveway, our nails manicured at our home or our sore throat examined without leaving the bedroom?

As our lives fill to overflowing and families increasingly send two parents into the workplace, we are feeding a demand for services that fit our schedules and lifestyles: mobile businesses.

From pet groomers to car washers to hair stylists on wheels, these entrepreneurs appeal to us time-pressed workers looking for any convenience to ease our harried lives and give us back some free time.

"Who wants to drive somewhere and have to wait when you know you have 100 things to do at home," says Sondra Pollack of Weston. Pollack uses a mobile pet groomer, Happy Tails, to wash and trim her golden retriever while she tackles the laundry on a day off work.

It has been more than three years since Dale Borts ditched her career as a dental hygienist, went to grooming school and started Happy Tails Mobile Pet Spa. Thanks to Pollack and other customers eager for convenience and willing to pay for it, Borts services only Weston and turns away new business. Although she charges about \$20 more per dog than a shop, she says, "I'm booked out for the rest of the year."

University of Florida professor Bart Weitz, an expert on buying habits, says mobile businesses capitalize on two trends: retailers selling convenience and people looking for opportunities to treat themselves.

"They are willing to spend a few dollars more on something special for themselves," Weitz says.

Experts say mobile entrepreneurs are multiplying fast, operating from elaborately converted vans or mobile homes that double as key advertising billboards. They are learning along the way what it takes to build a business that is portable, but also financially and psychologically rewarding. To make a profit, particularly with rising gas prices, these business owners typically limit the territory or number of customers they serve daily -- and they depend heavily on repeat business and referrals.

Mark Price, founder of My Home Doctor, says making house calls helps build rapport with patients. Charging about \$300 per visit, his doctors travel with black bags to offices as well.

"Corporate patients had no time to drive to the clinic or doctors office, wait their turn and get back to work or home again," he says. "In coming to them, we can offer them one-on-one treatment in the comfort of their own surroundings."



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Dr. Ken Rosenthal makes a house call in Coral Gables for the mobile business My Home Doctor, which charges about \$300 per visit.

[Mobile services in South Florida](#)

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The cost of having such services come to you is only financially viable for some people, mostly the middle and upper classes. Tack on a few extra bucks to as much as an additional \$100 for the convenience.

Some employers now offer mobile services as a perk to workers. When I pull up in front of my office on a Monday, and Daniel McBride of Mobile Chiropractic eagerly offers to manipulate my bones, adjust my neck or massage my shoulders in his RV. Although I or my insurer has to pick up the cost, my employer makes it easy to get the service on my lunch hour. A few months ago, my company even brought Spa On Wheels to the building. Although employees picked up the tab, some of us had a chance to squeeze in some "me" time that hectic family schedules and long work hours make difficult.

About three years ago, Patricia Serentill hit the road with this unusual concept -- a mobile day spa that provides services such as facials and body treatments in Miami and South Broward. Janet Bruzos and a handful of her girlfriends regularly luxuriate with spa treatments in the comfort of Bruzos' family room. Says Bruzos: ``We're all so busy and add to that traffic, most of us don't want to leave our house or office if we don't have to."

For these businesses that attract most of their customers by word of mouth or through the Internet, growth often demands a new marketing push -- adding another vehicle or spiffing up a website.

Veterinarian Avi Adulami makes house calls in North Dade from his high-tech van. For the past 10 years, he has built his business to capacity with appointments scheduled six days a week. He now wants to expand his mobile vet service with more vans, which would mean hiring another vet.

Like most of these mobile owners, Adulami says, ``I have more business than I can handle."

Send your comments and ideas to Cindy Krischer Goodman at cgoodman@MiamiHerald.com.

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