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GULF COAST

# Business Review

The Daily News Source for Gulf Coast Business Leaders

ENTREPRENEURS

## Emerald Opportunity

BY: MARK GORDON | MANAGING EDITOR



Steve Ellis, left, and John Ferrari of Sarasota-based DwellGreen are trying to bring a franchise business model to “green” home renovation.

Two executives, one from technology and one from the construction field, are betting they will turn the latest go-green concept into gold.

Steve Ellis and John Ferrari’s construction-based business might only be four months old, but it’s already at a crossroads.

The company, Sarasota-based DwellGreen, is at the place where green — the trendy environmental kind — meets the kind of green that’s synonymous with actual cash. The company’s plan is to penetrate the green construction industry by sending out an army of home auditors, who, it promises, will help homeowners figure out how to green-up their homes for both environmental and cost-saving purposes.

"We might have this grand vision of saving the planet," says Ferrari. "But we realize there are homeowners out there right now who just want to save money."

The plan for the startup is to combine those missions: For \$299, DwellGreen will send a certified green construction technician to a house — he'll arrive in a Toyota Prius — to look at everything from window panes and attic installation to light bulbs and air ducts. The technician will then create a Web-based report for the homeowner with an analysis of the short-term costs and long-term savings if the green changes are made.

The company has made about 30 green house calls in the Sarasota area since officially launching in May. But DwellGreen is seeking more than a onetime revenue hit.

Through Ferrari, a former Nokia executive, the company is also building a database of service providers in the subcontracting industry who can actually do the home improvement work. DwellGreen plans to charge those service providers a 10% fee for any referrals that turn into actual jobs, which can cost from \$5,000 to \$20,000.

And there is one more twist to DwellGreen: The company plans to franchise the concept. It has a few potential partners in the Sarasota area and is currently seeking joint venture deals for other markets in Florida, including Naples, Tampa, Jupiter and Miami. "We are branding and growing this thing as a franchise right out of the box," says Ellis.

The company is also currently meeting with potential angel investors to fund more expansion.

DwellGreen is the brainchild of John Lambie and Ellis, two industry veterans on the short list of Sarasota-area construction entrepreneurs considered to be leaders in the local go-green movement. Lambie has been in the green building business for 30 years.

And Ellis' MyGreenBuildings, a Sarasota-based general contracting firm, was one of the fastest-growing companies on the Gulf Coast last year. Its revenues increased from \$400,000 in 2007 to \$3 million in 2008, a 650% jump.

Ferrari, meanwhile, comes to DwellGreen from a career in technology. Most recently, he served as president and chief executive of LightPort, a Tampa-based software company. And before that, Ferrari was one of Nokia's first U.S.-based employees, leading the company's global expansion in the 1990s.

But Ferrari has also long held a passion for real estate, including working on six home renovation projects in Florida and his native Massachusetts as a hobby over the years. "I've always been a greenie on the side," says Ferrari.

Ferrari and Ellis have been the public faces of DwellGreen. The pair has met with a bevy of public officials, construction executives and potential investors to spread their mission. Says Ellis: "Everybody we have talked to about this says we are on to something big."

John Cranor, a retired top executive of companies such as Pepsi and KFC, is one of those folks. Cranor, the 2008-09 chairman of the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce, is both a DwellGreen adviser and customer.

Cranor is also considering investing in the company. He likes that there is legitimate business sense to DwellGreen's plan, in terms of going after a market need. But he's also aware that so-called green businesses are common nowadays and not all can deliver genuine results.

"I have no interest in supporting a business just because it says it's green and does good," says Cranor. "I have a great deal of interest in supporting a business that has the potential to make money."