

Lending a helping hand

Referral business helps take guesswork out of finding home contractors

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BUXTON— Choosing professionals for home repairs is no longer a gamble, thanks to a company in Buxton.

Home Project Partners, owned by Paul Lawrence and wife Cynthia Bellefountaine since 2002, screens builders, plumbers and other home repair professionals so homeowners don't have to.

Lawrence got the idea for a referral business while working as an inspector for the Portland Water District for 14 years. Working with people, Lawrence found a knack for the service business, but through the years, his job skewed more towards meetings and less towards interaction. Lawrence was also "constantly hounded by people for referrals," and had a negative experience with a person who worked on his home. All of those factors lead to his conclusion that starting a referral business could be a successful endeavor.

"I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice if you could just push a button and know who to call?'" said

Lawrence. Several years later, Home Project Partners is thriving, with 57 contractors signed on. The company is Lawrence's retirement plan, and Bellefountaine aids with the financial side of the business while still working full time. Getting the business up and running was no easy task, and Lawrence still does a lot of traveling and long days.

"I though I'd like to do something on my own," he said. "Reality hit hard, but I'm very happy I did it."

Lawrence started with about 10 people who he had met through work and the business has grown ever since. Now he spends his days interviewing contractors and their references, visiting work sites and communicating with clients. Networking is a key part of



Paul Lawrence, owner of Buxton-based Home Project Partners, screens contractors so homeowners can have piece of mind before they hire. Lawrence provides free referrals to clients looking for builders, plumbers, painters and other home repair professionals.

Lawrence's business, so he also spends time with the Business Network International of Southern Maine and the network group at the Saco Monarch Center. Realtors and lawyers are part of Lawrence's network as well.

Home Project Partners charges a sliding fee to contractors, only if they get a job through the referral, but does not charge the client. The contractors are not employed by the company: Belonging to a referral service is akin to advertising, said Lawrence, and can lead to

long-term clients. Homeowners, landlords and especially those who are new to the area use the service to find reputable professionals for home repairs.

Home Project Partners also discounts their fees for contractors who do small jobs, such as replacing door knobs, when elderly people request help.

Developing relationships with contractors is the key part of Lawrence's business. From background checks to site visits,

Lawrence looks for workers who do quality work and act professionally. He also tries to become familiar with the contractors in order to provide the best match when a client requests referrals. While some prefer long term jobs others like to move on after a week or two, and some restrict their travel area.

"We get a feel for their likes and dislikes," said Lawrence.

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For clients, Home Project Partners looks deep into how the contractor will treat the customer. Interviews with five or more references last for 15-20 minutes, said Lawrence, and he finds out specifics such as whether or not the contractor calls if he will be late. Current licensing and insurance is also required and Home Project Partners updates their files every

two years. Clients are usually sent information about three contractors who Lawrence believes will fit the job, and the final decision is that of the client. Home Project Partners assures that contractors will contact the clients within two business days.

"It's a good feeling type of business," said Lawrence. "We eliminate the guesswork."

Plumbers, electricians, architects, excavators, painting and several other home renovation and

repair-related services are available through Home Project Partners. If a client requests a service that is not currently offered by any of the contractors in the referral network, Lawrence will go through the process of interviewing to screen workers who provide that service.

Now serving York and Cumberland Counties, Lawrence plans to extend the referral company by adding more contractors in the Sanford and Kennebunk areas. Contractors are required to guarantee their work and sign onto a Home Project Partners code of ethics. Most of the contractors are individuals or small companies of five or less, said Lawrence, though some are larger.

Lawrence's advice for homeowners is to have patience. Projects should be planned about six months in advance, as contractors are often booked for months ahead, and plans

should be solidified so that estimates will be comparable. Home Project Partners acts as a mediator between the contractor and client and helps to keep communication open.

"We monitor the project from start to finish," said Lawrence.

Future plans include a Web site with comments from real people, possibly with ratings on different contractors. In the meantime, Lawrence can be reached by phone at (207) 929-6981 or e-mail at projekpartner@yahoo.com.

Lawrence would also like to offer a newsletter with suggestions from contractors on how to prepare for a job. For now, Home Project Partners is focusing on connecting quality home repair professionals with Southern Maine clients, lessening the chances for the expensive mistake of choosing a poor contractor.