

THINKING BIG

Trash talking

From startup in 2003, Just Junk's Mike Thorne expects to collect \$1 million in revenues this year

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Mike Thorne had to figure out one day how to remove old office equipment from the building of his employer Bell Canada in downtown Toronto.

He had some trouble finding a firm to do the job. Beyond the odd mom and pop shop, the shortage of adequate removal services prompted Thorne to wonder how he could fill the need of dealing with junk effectively.

It led to an idea that would awaken an entrepreneurial spirit and change his life.

Now, all Thorne thinks about is Just Junk, the bustling St. Catharines-based removal company he founded in 2003 after quitting his job as a Bell control centre manager.

"Everything in the world needs to be removed and disposed of at some point in an environmentally friendly way," the 29-year-old Queen's University economics graduate said in an interview. "I thought there was a real need for this."

Thorne said time is a precious commodity and consumers are looking for fast and efficient ways to dispose junk. Furthermore, baby boomers have lifetimes worth of junk and they want to downsize.

And in today's throw-away society, consumers also tend to discard items after a few years, he said. Curbside programs can't take them all.

Other companies in the region, such as Wee Haul, TrashBusters and Junk It, have also noticed the same signs of junk overload such as garages with no room for cars, basements spilling over and backyards piling up with bulging boxes.

In Thorne's case, he packed his bags, moved back to his hometown of St. Catharines and posted a tiny classified ad in the local newspaper that simply said: "Just Junk. You call, we haul." The ad included a phone number.

THINKING continued on B3



SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Just Junk founder Mike Thorne, 29, has more than just junk on his mind these days: the Queen's economics grad wants 100 franchises by 2012.

One man's garbage is another's goldmine

THINKING from B1

In the first day, eight people contacted his cellphone to remove their junk. Thorne immediately knew he was in business.

Thorne and another worker began hauling away junk from homes and businesses in their trusty blue 1975 Ford van for recycling and disposal.

The phone hasn't stopped ringing. Almost 4½ years and 10,000 customers later, Thorne now has four heavy duty trucks and 12 employees in the region and a plan to take Just Junk across Canada and the U.S. primarily through franchises.

"We're in a hyper growth mode now," he said referring to the exercise of carefully sifting through franchise prospects. "We're also putting all profits back into the business."

Just Junk runs its original corporate operation in the Niagara Falls and St. Catharines area where staff in green shirts and khaki trousers pick up everything from old furniture and appliances to yard waste and comic books for recycling or disposal.

The company opened its first franchise in the Hamilton, Burlington and Oakville corridor last year. It aims to add 10 franchises this year, another 25 in 2009 and a total of 100 by the end of 2012.

The company is currently working on setting up its first corporate operation in Florida.

Just Junk charges an initial franchise fee of \$16,000 for territories with a 100,000 people and another \$8,000 for each subsequent 100,000. Franchisees must also pay annual royalties based on revenues.

In exchange, they get the advantages of the Just Junk business model, referrals from a central call

centre, national advertising, customized software for business analysis and administrative support.

Removal prices range from \$108 for the equivalent of one pickup truck of junk to \$468 for eight loads.

Revenue in the first full year, 2004, totalled about \$165,000. This year they will top \$1 million, according to Thorne.

Thorne spent the first two years working in the field during the day and running the business at night. In 2006, he began working most of his 12-hour days in the company's office.

In hindsight, Thorne said his biggest regret is not finding a mentor to provide guidance in the early years of Just Junk.

"There was a lot of trial and error," he said.

Thorne noted he would have also paid closer attention to building better processes. For example, staff initially didn't have strong scripts for interacting with customers to emphasize service values.

Regardless of the pitfalls and unenviable task of handling a lot of junk, Thorne has encountered few dull days.

Oddest hauls? The firm has pulled away an 800-pound bank vault door, 2,000 pounds of Jack Daniels whisky bottles, eight motorcycles, half a sailboat and even accepted requests from elderly ladies seeking rides to stores after completion of a job.

There was also the situation of a doctor leaving the country who sought the removal of a 1,000-year-old human skeleton originally from India.

Just Junk donated the full skeleton in a metal box to the kinesiology department at McMaster University in Hamilton.