



HOME-BASED DOOR BUSINESS

Arizona dealer finds success without a storefront or advertising

By Tom Wadsworth, CDDC

Editor's note: The typical door dealer interview features a large company with many employees and lots of trucks. However, our statistics indicate that more than half of all door companies have 10 employees or fewer, and almost a third have only one to five employees.

I suspect that a large portion of our readers will be able to identify with the subject of this interview: Marc Teason of Western Garage Doors in Queen Creek, Ariz. We chose Marc because he came to us as a highly recommended dealer in the Phoenix market.

Unlike many dealers, Marc operates out of his home, and he doesn't advertise. How can such a business survive in today's world? Here's his story.

When did you first start hanging garage doors?

It was 1992. I was 18 when I started working for Arizona Used Garage Doors in Tempe. They recycled used garage doors and installed them. We would literally go dumpster diving to reclaim used doors. They would also get factory-second doors and sell those at a discounted rate. The company is no longer in business.

I left there around 1995 and worked for Lincoln Door in Tempe for two or three years, installing garage doors and automatic pedestrian doors. But I was frustrated with doing a lot of work and not getting paid very much money.

When did you go into business for yourself?

It was February 1997, and I was 23. I had two years of college at Central Arizona College, but I was done with school.

What were your primary motivations for starting your own business?

One was financial, and the other was freedom,



THREE GUYS, THREE TRUCKS:
 (From left) Gerry Teason, Marc Teason, and Jeff Simpson pose in front of Teason's home, the headquarters of Western Garage Doors.

being able to do things the way I wanted. I had seen other installers leave to start their own businesses, so I thought I could do it, too.

Do you remember your total sales that first year?

It wasn't much. About \$25,000.

Total sales? Was that for an entire year?

Yep. That was from March until December. It was rough, but my wife worked also.

That sounds like a rough year.

I didn't know what I was getting into, and I didn't know how difficult it was going to be. I had no funding, and I didn't know how to generate business. I had nothing. I had some tools and a Toyota pickup truck with a rack on it. That's it.

How did you generate business?

I got some flyers made and hung them on doors in my area. With the help of some family and friends, we probably distributed a few thousand of them.

Did it work?

Yeah. I got some operator sales and service calls. After that, I advertised with a small ad in the phone book, but nothing major. I finally took out a substantial ad in 2006 or 2007, but the market then crashed, and I never advertised after that.

So, you don't advertise?

I have a small ad that costs about \$300/year; it goes in a directory for a retirement community. Other than that, I have no ads. I have a website, but I don't do Yelp, Angie's List, or anything. I know that I have reviews on there, but I've never paid money on those sites. I've also never heard of any negative reviews posted for my business.

For me in this area, the most important website is the Arizona Contractors' Registration site (<https://roc.az.gov>). I make sure that I have no complaints against me on that site.

Why did you stop advertising?

Back then, everything was going to the internet, and there was a learning curve involved. I was leery of all that, so I stayed away.

When did you finally get a website?

It was 2009. I don't know if it attracts business or not, but it definitely doesn't hurt. The internet is important today, and you have to be able to communicate via email. A fax machine is obsolete.

How then do customers find you?

Word of mouth and referrals. They might find me on the internet, too.

What was the smartest move you made in your first five years?

I didn't get financing or use credit cards to purchase anything. I paid for everything with cash. I wasn't in debt to anyone for anything. It's not the way for everybody to do it, but it was good for me.

In the beginning, I also didn't take credit cards either. It was cash or check only. But I've been taking credit cards for 10 or 15 years now.

When did you first hire an additional person to help?

I hired my first employee in 2000 and the second one in 2006. I'm now running three trucks with the three of us.

Do you pay them a salary, hourly, or are they paid a commission on each job?

They're paid a salary plus piece work. No commission.

How do you handle health insurance?

I have health insurance through my wife's job. I'm not required to provide it for my guys; I think they get it through their wives, too. Health insurance is really a non-issue for me.

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LITTLE ADVERTISING: Outside of one small \$300 ad, this website is Western Garage Doors' only advertisement.

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What were your total sales in 2016?

\$750,000. I feel pretty good about that.

I understand that almost all of your business is residential. What percentage of your business comes from contractors and builders?

About 50 percent.

You must get a lot of repeat business.

About 90 percent of my work is referrals and repeat customers. The other 10 percent might come from [people] seeing my truck, my website, my sticker on a door, or maybe my one ad.

Why do your customers keep coming back?

I treat them fairly. I don't take advantage of them. If something is broken, I fix it at a fair price. I don't try to sell them something that they don't need.

I sell rollers for the same price whether they live in a million-dollar home or a \$100,000 home. Some guys increase their price if the home looks expensive. Our price is the same price on everything for everybody.

Our customers like our service and our honesty. We're straightforward and down to earth. We're honest with them, and they appreciate it.

What do contractors say about you?

They say I do what I said I'm going to do. If there are problems, I take care of it. I have no warranty issues. I take care of it right the first time. I'm reliable, and my price is fair. I'm not the cheapest, but I'm also not the most expensive.

What advice could you give to someone else who is just getting into the business?

Just be fair. Be fair to yourself and be fair to the customer. Don't overcharge and don't undercharge. You're not going to get rich off just one job. Do a good job for a fair price and then do it consistently.

Last week, a customer asked me, "Can you do it for fifty dollars cheaper?" I said no. I know my price is fair, and I don't need to compromise. He later called me back and asked me to come do the job.

Since you essentially operate out of your truck, have you ever been called a tailgater?

Yes.

Do you consider yourself a tailgater?

No. I am licensed, bonded, and insured, and I have three employees.



Marc Teason

If you were licensed, bonded, and insured but had no employees, would that make you a tailgater?

It all depends on how you define it. If you were a one-man band and not licensed, bonded, or insured, I'd say you were definitely a tailgater.

Operating out of your home must have advantages. What are the main ones?

Having less overhead expense is the main advantage. It helps me control costs and operate efficiently. Plus, I can go into my office at home anytime and get some work done.

But that's also a drawback, right?

Yes it is. You can't get away from it. You're always at work.

When the business phone rings, you know that it's potential income on the other end of the line. I usually answer it, but sometimes you just have to let it go to voicemail ... like when it's late or on a weekend.

What are the main business disadvantages of working out of your home?

Having no showroom is the biggest disadvantage. Plus, I don't get over-the-counter sales from customers who just want to buy parts and install on their own.

Since you don't have a showroom, how do you show customers what a new garage door looks like?

I use First United Door's showroom. It's a great showroom with a wide range of door styles. I sometimes meet the customer there. Otherwise, I also have section samples and plenty of literature. When I set up an appointment with a customer, I often go to their house and measure

the door opening. We then sit down with brochures and section samples. It works fine.

Could you continue operating this way until you retire?

I think so. I'd like to get a little bigger. I might get to where I would have a store location with an office and somebody answering the phone. A little warehouse space would be nice, but in the Phoenix area, I don't really need much. Manufacturers have plenty of distribution centers in the area.

Ultimately, I'd like to hit the million-dollar mark and hire one more guy, but I don't want to grow too fast. I want to make sure I'm still taking care of my customers.

You seem to be aware that the Phoenix area is known for "Bad Bobs" who grossly overcharge and perform unnecessary repairs.

I've known about these guys for at least 10 years. I once hired an installer who used to work for GDS. He told me that he had to get a minimum \$400 ticket from every customer. If he could sell something for more than its normal price, he would split the excess with the company. So, if an operator normally sold for \$300, he could sell it for \$400 and put \$50 in his own pocket.

He was a hard worker, but he knew very little about fixing a garage door. Everything he knew was wrong. I had to train him about garage doors from the ground up.

How has this "Bad Bob" problem affected you?

I get a lot of repeat business from their ex-customers. Most of the time, customers use them only once. After people get a big repair bill, they talk. They talk to their friends, their family, and their neighbors. Word spreads. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that you shouldn't call those guys anymore.

Just a week or so ago, a homeowner called me and asked what I charged for a spring change. Right then, he had a technician in his garage, wanting to charge him a lot. I told him that I do spring changes for \$205 for a two-car door, plus tax.

On the spot, he told the tech to get out of his garage. I came out and did the spring change the next day. He told me that the tech wanted to replace his bearings, rollers, and other stuff. Crazy.

When you rip people off like that, word spreads. At the same time, when you're honest and fair, word gets around about that, too. ■