

INSIDE TRACK

TONY COBB



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTOMICHAEL BLICK

Tony Cobb developed a gutter protection system while working as a painting contractor because clogged gutters were hindering the painting efforts.

Cobb Guts Out Competition

By Anne Bond Emrich

GRANDVILLE — Tony Cobb is supremely confident in his new rain gutter protection system's ability to keep rain gutters free of debris and standing water.

In August, about 160 dealers began introducing his patented Gutter Guardian gutter protection system to customers nationwide and in parts of Canada, as well. The product is being sold in some markets under the Gutter Control and Gutter Magic brand names.

Cobb, owner of All Gutter Systems Inc., anticipates product sales could top \$5 million in 2004. He further speculates that by 2006, Gutter Guardian sales could weaken the dominance of industry leader Gutter Helmet, which touts itself as "The first, The best, The No. 1" gutter protection system in the world.

He expects to sign up 100 to 140 more dealers by year's end, making the product available from Florida to Minnesota to Pennsylvania to California.

"If Gutter Helmet can do \$10 million over one brand, we can do \$30 million or \$40 million with this product," Cobb projects.

Gutter Guardian is the first knockoff of Gutter Helmet's successful "nose forward" design introduced to the market about 20 years ago. Gutter Helmet's patent on the design expired November 2001 and Cobb saw an opportunity.

BRIEFLY

Name: Tony A. Cobb
Company: All Gutter Systems Inc.
Title: Owner
Age: 36
Birthplace: South Lyon, Mich.
Residence: Grandville
Personal: Wife, Carol; four children
Biggest career break: Losing his dealership with Gutter Helmet.
Business organizations: President, American Association of Rain Carrying System Installation Specialists; member of the Home & Building Association of Greater Grand Rapids.

But Cobb's product is "dramatically" different from the original in that it uses a "completely revolutionary" patent-pending bracket, the Smart Clip, to anchor the system to the building's fascia, he said. He said that unlike competing brands, the Smart Clip doesn't require nails to hold it in place, so it doesn't damage either shingles or the roof.

As Cobb explained it, rainwater flows over and around the "nose," which extends over existing full-size gutters and channels rainwater into the gutter while forcing leaves and debris to the ground.

Gutter Guardian also has a better paint finish, he said. It's the same paint that's used on skyscrapers.

"It's very expensive to do, but you don't

See Cobb, page 14

Cobb

Continued from page 5

to have to repaint it."

His partner in the venture, Quality Edge Inc., manufactures Gutter Guardian at its new 150,000-square-foot plant in Walker. Cobb said the company is already planning to expand by another 30,000 square feet.

Cobb had been involved in residential painting while a student at Calvin College and actually launched his career while working as a painting contractor. His painting crews, he recalled, always ended up having to subcontract for a lot of gutter-cleaning work as part of the job.

"It got to the point where I couldn't get the work done quick enough to satisfy the customer, so I had to buy my own gutter machines."

He founded All Gutter Systems in 1994 as a residential and commercial contracting business. His company presently has eight gutter-cleaning machines that serve West Michigan customers.

Gutter cleaning naturally goes hand and hand with gutter protection, Cobb said.

"You can't keep up with all that cleaning in the month of November. It's very difficult to manage. Some people have to have their gutters cleaned three or four times a year. That's what got us into gutter protection."

Cobb previously had a Gutter Helmet dealership. When he lost the dealership, he took a bad situation and turned it into an opportunity by developing the Gutter Guardian prototype.

"When you get that kind of pressure

put on you, you immediately get real creative," Cobb said.

These days, he devotes his time to selling Gutter Guardian and participating in trade shows nationwide.

The product's reception has been extremely successful, he said, because there's already high market demand for the product and there are only a couple of good, top-of-the-line products that Gutter Guardian competes with at this time.

"We didn't go to the market with exclusive product. We went to the market with an exclusive brand. We've already wrapped up Gutter Guardian for the entire country."

He estimates that about 24 jobs will be created across West Michigan dealerships authorized to carry the Gutter Guardian

product line. Besides All Gutter Systems, dealerships currently include New Line Construction of Grand Rapids, Sir Home Improvements and Howk Home Improvements of Kalamazoo and USA Gutters of Watervliet.

Not only is Gutter Guardian's design innovative, but the product is available at "significantly lower" prices than the competition's product in many U.S. markets, including West Michigan, he said.

He said the cost of purchasing and installing Gutter Guardian ranges from \$800 to \$1,800 for the average home, and that the investment could save homeowners a lot of money over the years that would otherwise have to be spent on gutter cleaning.

Gutter cleaning also is risky business, he pointed out.

"There are a lot of beautiful homes out there that are in the woods," he said. "Homeowners don't want to be up there cleaning the gutters on steep-pitched roofs."

Add to that the risk of water collecting in clogged gutters and providing an easy breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Cobb's not worried about going head to head with the industry leader. He's tackled big projects before. In 1998 he climbed Mount McKinley solo just to prove to himself that he could.

"I'm a highly motivated person. No grass grows under my feet. This opportunity is unlimited, so that's very motivating to me."

Success is achieved through "hard work, persistence and God's blessing," he believes. "And you need to have all three." ■