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Orders fly in for local online appliance repair company

By Darrell Clem
Staff Writer

An 81-year-old woman was distraught after the baking element quit working on the General Electric oven range that came with a house she bought 50 years ago.

Without a replacement part, she faced a pricey decision to replace not only her beloved avocado green stove but, to avoid clashing kitchen colors, the matching refrigerator and dishwasher.

After ordering a \$20.88 part from Canton-based RepairClinic.com, this happy Connecticut customer can use her retro range and bake until her heart's content. She even said so in an email she sent to this growing company, on Michigan Avenue west of Beck.

“I’m good for another 50 years,” she wrote. “On second thought, that might be a reach. I’m 81 years old. Still, the part is supposed to extend the range’s life — not mine.”

That’s a favorite testimonial of Jody Lamb, public relations manager for RepairClinic.com, a multimillion-dollar company that stocks more than a million parts — mostly new, some aftermarket — for major home appliances, vacuum cleaners and outdoor power equipment such as lawn mowers and weed trimmers. Just weeks ago, the business launched its product line for heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

Adding video

RepairClinic.com touts annual sales of \$30 million to \$50 million and ships thousands of parts every day by Fed Ex throughout the United States and, since August, to Canada. It has reached three million customers.

What’s more, the company has complemented its parts by producing 850 do-it-yourself videos that have accumulated 10 million hits on its YouTube channel and its own website, www.RepairClinic.com.

Not bad for former appliance repairman Chris Hall, the company president who started the business in a rental building in 1999 with CEO Larry Beach. It became so successful they opened their current 86,000-square-foot facility in 2004, Hall said, “and 2012 has been the best year in the history of our company.”

RepairClinic.com employs 130 full- and part-time workers, though it expects to add several jobs next year. The vast majority of its customers order their parts online, though some walk in to the front desk and others contact a telephone call center that’s open 6:30 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week, with English- and Spanish-speaking employees.

The company has established a strong following among the online do-it-yourself community, which relies on videos to repair 150 brands ranging from carpet cleaners to washing machines. RepairClinic.com also has started making troubleshooting videos to help customers.

Picture perfect

Moreover, the company has a photo lab where pictures are taken — and posted online — for the parts it stocks. It also has a partnership to provide parts to 2,000 Home Depot stores.

Though RepairClinic.com had a slower-than-normal year in 2010, Hall said business has otherwise flourished amid a tough economy as more people delay expensive purchases and buy much-cheaper replacement parts.

“We're growing because of the economy,” Hall said, adding later, “Refrigerators are the biggest thing. They have a lot more parts than other appliances.”

Lamb has noticed one consumer trend.

“There has been a definite recent spike in comments from customers making a point to identify themselves as women, 65-plus years old or unhandy by nature,” she said.

Customers pay a flat \$5 shipping fee, though they can pay more for rush orders. RepairClinic.com sells more parts to the most populated states, but orders have shipped to every state, Puerto Rico and Ontario, Canada.

“California is our biggest market just because of the population,” Hall, a Saline resident, said.

Inside the RepairClinic.com building, Hall and Lamb gave a tour of an efficient, high-tech facility that allows employees to use software, wireless gadgets, cardboard boxes, biodegradable packing materials, an automated conveyor system and stock-picker lift trucks to locate specific items, get them packaged and shipped to customers.

Protect the rep

Company worker Dean Kovacs of Romulus drives a lift truck, which essentially operates itself using an under-concrete wire that communicates with a truck sensor to guide the vehicle to the appropriate shelf. The truck then lifts Kovacs up — sometimes way up — so he can retrieve the part.

“It's like second nature after a while,” he said.

In another area, video production manager Roger Ryan of Livonia and video specialist Adam Earl of Brighton demonstrated the do-it-yourself videos they make using information they get from repair gurus. They strive to create videos to help even the most fix-it-challenged viewer.

Pausing in one area, meanwhile, Hall points to a large box filled with 150 pressure washer pumps the company has received for its stock.

“If we order 150 of these,” he said, “it means that part is failing.”

RepairClinic.com has built a reputation on customer service, including a return policy that stretches a full year. That's how confident Hall and others are that they are providing the parts and the videos people need to succeed.

“We're empowering people to fix something they used to hire out,” Hall said. “We're not saving the world. We're just helping people fix something like a washing machine.”

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