

NW Florida's Business[®]

September/October 2005
Volume 16, Issue 5

Climate Magazine

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Sewing in Paradise

TLM's Tim Mossberg Stitches Competitive Uniform Business

By Ezra Mannix

For just about any type of uniform, business owners in Northwest Florida don't need to look to far-flung textile makers in East Asia or Central America, thanks to Tim Mossberg.

Mossberg is owner of TLM Industries, Inc., of Fort Walton Beach. His company makes uniforms for schools food service companies, and grocery and convenience stores nationwide. He has developed cost-efficiencies for manufacturing and eliminated the middleman, making his clothes competitive in price with the most inexpensive overseas manufacturers, he said.

"Many companies that would contract the work out overseas would lose control of manufacturing process to save on labor. We cut out the middleman," and inconsistent sizes, cuts, and colors that vary drastically from order to order as overseas contractors switch manufacturers.

In addition, his methods ensure that the product delivered to the customer are precise and consistent order after order, a guarantee overseas manufacturers cannot often live up to.

Keeping the work in the U.S. can be attributed somewhat to his personal interests. Mossberg is an avid saltwater fisherman, boating enthusiast, and scuba diver. Moving his business from Atlanta seven years ago was therefore an easy decision. But it wasn't just access to the water that spurned the move. Northwest Florida also has a surplus of semi-skilled workers left over from the days when textile mills were common here and all over the South. Two textile plants in Crestview that came and went "left generations of textile workers," said Mossberg. Crestview is where most of his stitching takes place today.

"To have that labor force in the area is fantastic," he added.

Although he faces challenges of losing labor to the growing tourism industry in the area, Mossberg relishes doing business in a region that is sparsely populated yet

business friendly. "This is better than a major metro area. It doesn't matter where we're shipping from because we're national."

"We came to live on the beach, and we love the beach scene. It was a dream for us," he said, alluding to his wife and two daughters who live with him in Destin.

The dream started when Mossberg was a financial planner for Prudential and Dean Witter Reynolds, where he performed retirement planning seminars for companies. He was looking for a trinket to give away to his attendees. After coming up with foam travel mugs, which were popular at the time, he contacted a fraternity brother in Atlanta who sold those, and found his price to be half or less than that of competitors.

"Why? Because he eliminated the middleman," Mossberg explained.

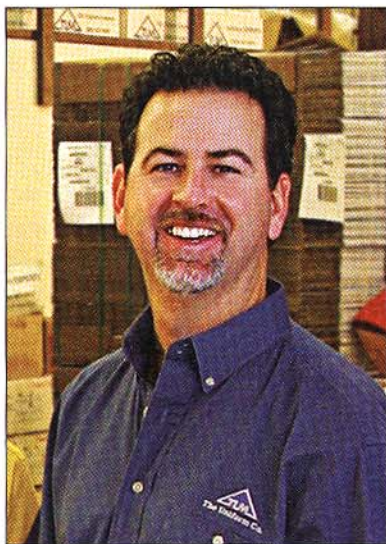
After seeing the profit potential in that business, he left the financial planning field and began selling screen printed cups and mugs to convenience stores. He found out those convenience stores needed uniforms, too. Ten years ago, he contracted out the manufacture of these to other companies, but then decided to have it all done under his supervision – from sewing machine to shipping.

It was this niche market that made him a source in a recent *Entrepreneur* magazine article from August. "Scratch a Niche" by Laura Koss-Feder is about how to market a niche product or service without being too faddish or too specialized.

Today, Mossberg's biggest client is SSP Partners of Corpus Christi, Texas, which operates approximately 300 convenience stores under the Circle K brand. By the numbers, most of Mossberg's business, 70 percent, comes from convenience stores, 10 percent from grocery, and 10 percent from school uniforms, including Fort Walton Beach High.

Future plans for Mossberg include diving deeper into the niche market available online. His new site, boatwearonline.com, comes out in early September, and will allow customers to play with online templates to design a shirt with a logo or design for their own boat.

For the boating enthusiast, Mossberg's Web site, just like his move to Florida, represents a merge of personal passion and the bottom line. ☀



Tim Mossberg