

These people do make house calls – and business is good

Time constraints, aging population fuel demand

By Stephanie Armour
USA TODAY

As time becomes an increasingly precious commodity, a number of businesses are going mobile – taking their services on the road to make house calls.

In-home service providers will do just about anything: fix a computer problem, string up Christmas lights, X-ray a foot or sharpen rusty garden tools.

In the Seattle area, residents can hire a plant expert who makes horticultural house calls, coming to homes to help prune a plant or perk up a lawn.

As concierge medicine takes off – patients pay extra for 24-hour care and extra attention – doctors are making house calls again, arriving at patients' doors with portable X-ray machines.

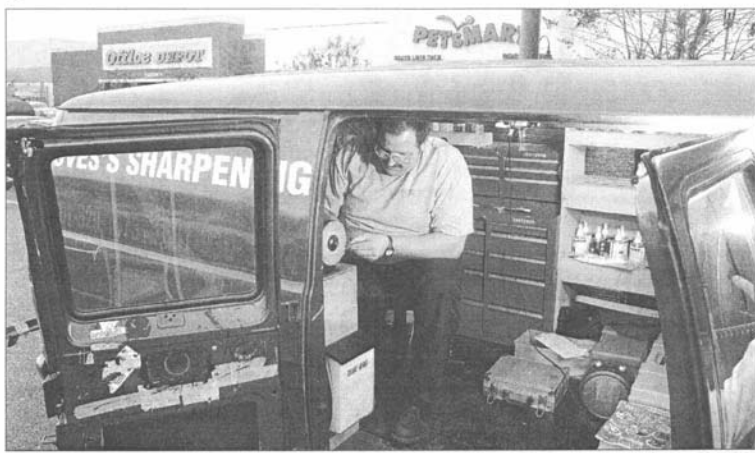
In 2002, Best Buy purchased the Geek Squad, specialists who help with computer-related issues. Now available at all Best Buy stores, the specialists will come to a customer's home to do such tasks as setting up a wireless home network or dealing with a computer crash.

"Our agents read the manual so you don't have to," says Kevin Cockett, a spokesman with Best Buy. "People like the convenience of an agent coming to the home. They get one-on-one service in the home."

Services meeting needs

The emphasis on in-home service is the result of several trends:

► Time-strapped Americans are more willing to pay for services that will alleviate stress and cut down on errand running: Combined weekly work hours for dual-earning couples with children rose 10 hours a week, from 81 hours in 1977 to 91 hours in 2002, according to a study by the New York-based Families and Work Institute.



At your service: Tim Love of Love's Sharpening in Edwards, Miss., sharpens some pet-grooming shears outside a Petsmart store in Jackson.

That's one reason nearly 50% of Americans say they "juggle many activities, and it sometimes feels like too much," according to a survey of the luxury consumer market by New York-based communications agency Euro RSCG Worldwide. The higher the income bracket, the more likely people were to agree.

► It's also the result of an aging population. Dentists, doctors, even funeral-services providers are trying to serve clients who find it more difficult to leave the home. The number of people 65 and older increased from 31.2 million in 1990 to 35 million in 2000, according to a 2004 U.S. Census report.

Some senior-care pharmacists, for example, now make house calls.

"Among more government programs, health care policies and consumers, there is demand for the

notion of 'aging in place,'" says Robert Appel, a spokesman with the Alexandria, Va.-based American Society of Consultant Pharmacists. "More people will be at home alone and at risk, so there will be greater demand for (in-home services)."

► And then there is the luxury factor: Consumers will pay to be pampered in their homes. Today's roster of in-home services includes private chefs who will drop off prepared meals that need only to be microwaved before dinner, and pet-waste-removal services that will remove dog droppings from the yard.

Consider one growing service: companies that provide residential holiday decorating. In Omaha, Creative Decorating festoons lights and other holiday displays at several hundred homes and businesses

each holiday season. This year, they put up 1 million lights.

Cost runs \$400 and up for the exterior of a home, and the prices include a one-time outlay for such equipment as lights. They also come and remove all displays at the end of the season.

"Business is growing. It's out of control," owner Brad Finkle says. "People see what their neighbors are doing and say, 'We better hire somebody. They're trying to keep up with the Joneses.'"

And Custom Christmas, based in Alexandria, La., had a client who spent \$18,000 this Christmas to have her home decorated – inside and out – for the holidays. The company strung 2,000 feet of lights from the roofline.

"These trees have become more of a decorator item than a family tradition, and that's part of the

trend," says Tim Petrus, who runs the company with his wife, Emma. "It's exploding. We literally have to turn business away."

Growing businesses

Many providers of these in-home services say business is booming.

Taise Marie McKinsey of Seattle, who will make home visits as part of her horticultural house-call business. Every house-call client receives a packet filled with gardening tips and handouts. The cost for the service is \$75 an hour within the greater Seattle area, with a \$15-per-hour charge for travel time for calls outside of Seattle.

"I made as much doing house calls as design. It's growing, and we're expanding the house calls," says McKinsey, a co-founder. "It's

like stomp the expert. We carry reference and resource material in our cars. It can be insect problems, how to plant something."

Many clients who use such services tout the timesaving benefits.

Says Kristina Murti of Seattle, a horticultural house-call client who used McKinsey to help her design a backyard: "She showed us where the plants should go. It was great. I've recommended her to several friends."

Services multiplying

And the types of services offered also are expanding, from yoga instructors who offer in-home sessions to manufacturers who offer in-home handyman services.

"Consumers value house calls for two reasons: convenience and certainty," says Bruce Judson, author of *Go it Alone! The Secret to Building a Successful Business on Your Own*. "Some of the best new businesses are created when entrepreneurs see an unmet need for a service."

► At Love's Sharpening in Edwards, Miss., owner Tim Love runs a mobile service. He makes house calls to sharpen such tools as scissors, barber tools, saw blades and anything else that get rusty or dull. The service harkens back to the 1800s, when sharpening services were routinely provided door-to-door. There is a per-item charge and a \$5 travel fee.

"Every year, I see a 10% increase (in business)," Love says.

► A growing number of entrepreneurs provide doctors who will make old-fashioned house calls. AM/PM House Calls of Hollywood, Fla., offers 24-hour medical house-call services. Some insurers will cover the cost.

► At Herz Financial, based in Farmington, Conn., and Boca Raton, Fla., financial house calls are made for an affluent clientele. Discussions may focus on such topics as estate planning to acquiring insurance products.

"We will meet with clients all over the world," Vice President Randy Herz says. "If you have to meet them at their yacht in Florida, you do that."