

## Printer-cartridge customers can opt for refill

September 2007

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As reproduction quality of personal printers has improved, the devices have begun to be used for everything from digital photos, to business presentations, to cartoon images downloaded from the Internet.

All of those things, however, use a lot of ink, and whether it's the desire to impress a potential client, or just capture those latest vacation photos, printing can be very expensive.

A Minneapolis-based company that just opened its first Las Vegas franchise has come up with an environmentally friendly way to defray some of those costs.

Rapid Refill Ink offers remanufactured laser and inkjet cartridges and toner at savings of up to 50 percent over the cost of new products.

"Our target market is anyone who has printers and is looking for convenience and quality at a great price," Steve Hockett, president of Rapid Refill Ink International, said.

"The emphasis is on retail, home offices and small businesses."

Steve Smarsh opened his Las Vegas franchise, the company's 100th, at 7735 South Durango Road, near Warm Springs Road last month. Smarsh said he was so convinced the concept was a winner, he gave up a lucrative job in the manufacturing industry in Michigan to set up shop here.

"I looked around at quite a few opportunities before I decided on them," Smarsh said.



Rapid Refill Ink franchise owner Steve Smarsh is shown at his store at 7735 South Durango Road, near Warm Springs Road.

Photo by Richard Brian

The reasonable franchise fee (between \$140,000 and \$180,000, on average, with a 6 percent royalty fee, according to Hockett), the increased demand for printer products and the company's focus on an environmentally friendly concept were enough to convince Smarsh to change jobs and relocate.

"The recycling aspect was very big for me," he said. "I really like that I am doing something to help the environment."

If it doesn't seem recycling a few ink cartridges would make much of a difference, the company provides a few eye-opening statistics that suggest otherwise.

Industry analysts estimate spent ink and toner cartridges can be reused between four and seven times but 86 percent of inkjet cartridges are used once and thrown away. In addition, 350 million laser toner cartridges end up in landfills.

Smarsh was vice president of operations for Tru Tech Systems, a company that does precision grinding work for the medical industry, so the fact that the business has a manufacturing element also appealed to him.

The store does much of the recycling on-site, with cartridges supplied by customers. This is not the typical drill-and-fill method offered to consumers as a do-it-yourself process.

That method involves taking a syringe, drawing ink from a bottle and injecting it into a cartridge. While this may not sound too difficult, problems such as clogged cartridges and spills are common. The process can also be time consuming, especially for businesses that use a lot of ink.

In fact, Hockett said many Rapid Refill customers are people who have tried the drill-and-fill method and found it ineffective.

"If you don't know what you are doing, that process can be messy and is not very thorough," Hockett said.

The Rapid Refill method is a six-step process that includes a visual inspection, an electronic inspection, interior cleaning, cartridge filling, a cartridge print test and packaging.

The process helps ensure that customers not only save money, but also get a high-quality cartridge that works.

"If the end result is an ineffective product, you're not really saving anything," Smarsh said.

While customers supply a lot of the cartridges that are remanufactured, it's not a fill-while-you-wait service. Cartridges that are brought in get an initial inspection, are



Inkjet technician David O'Quinn tests an ink cartridge at Rapid Refill Ink.

Photo by Richard Brian

replaced with in-store stock and the customer also gets a discount for the used cartridge.

Smarsh estimates about 60 percent of his customers will be business owners and has hired a salesman to help solicit clients. The remaining customers are expected to be walk-ins with home computers or businesses.

The store has only been open for a few weeks but Smarsh said he is already beginning to recognize some trends. A lot of his customers, for example, are people with children at home who download and print images.

"That's a bigger market than I thought," he said.

Hockett said that contrary to predictions, the Internet has actually increased printer use.

"A few years ago, everyone was saying that increased Internet access would create a paperless society but just the opposite has happened," he said.

The demand for all types of reproduced images has created, in Hockett's words, an explosion in the market.

As a result, companies such as Rapid Refill Ink are cashing in on a very lucrative niche business.

The company hopes to add between 15 and 20 stores in the Las Vegas area in the next five years, according to Hockett. The idea is to have a store in just about every neighborhood.

Hockett said that while printer ink is something people have an increased need for and the reconditioned cartridges are cheaper, the company doesn't think the savings are great enough that people will drive across town for them.

Smarsh said he likes the idea of having several franchises in the area, and hopes to open a few more himself, once the first store is established.

Since this store is equipped to fill cartridges, he explained, it could serve that purpose for multiple location and subsequent stores could be used strictly as sales locations.

The company is also looking to broaden its scope and provide other products such as printers and paper, to become more of a one-stop shop for customers.

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