

SMALLBIZ

A Bay Shore manufacturer takes international route

Offers a cheaper alternative to major home renovations

By **BERNADETTE STARZEE**

Michael Stracuzza developed GroutShields Color Seal – a do-it-yourself grout sealant, restoration, coloring and cleaning product – in his garage in West Islip. In April, the inventor expanded the warehouse space for his manufacturing company, GroutShields Distributors, for the third time in three years, trading 1,100 square feet in Hauppauge for 2,300 square feet in Bay Shore. The product has also been picked up for distribution in Ireland and Australia this year.

Grout was no stranger to Stracuzza, who started doing tile work when he was 16 years old.

“When grout gets dirty, it makes the entire room look discolored and disgusting,” he said. GroutShields,



Michael Stracuzza developed the idea for his product in 1997.

which comes in different colors, including custom colors, is applied to existing grout, allowing homeowners to change the grout color and appearance of their tile floors, walls, countertops and backsplashes. For \$59.99, it allows them to update the look of a room of up to 500 square feet. And, Stracuzza noted, if the walls or floors are property maintained – cleaned with a damp mop or cloth – the waterproof and stain-resistant sealer will last forever.

The poor economy has benefited Stracuzza's business. "People don't have the money to rip out an entire bathroom," he said. "After they use this product, their floor and walls – the entire room – will look completely transformed." If some grout is missing, do-it-yourselfers can mix the sealer with sanded or unsanded grout to fill in the holes.

Stracuzza came up with the idea for the product in 1997. He contacted a chemist and tested it over a five-year period, and then began applying it in his contracting work.

In 2006, GroutShields launched a Web site and began marketing the product directly to consumers, in the form of do-it-yourself kits. Web site videos demonstrate how effective

and easy to use the product is. Stracuzza, for instance, pours soy sauce on a floor containing his product in one area and ordinary grout in another. The ordinary grout immediately discolors, while GroutShields remains pristine.

The Web site gets 100 to 150 hits a day, and the company fills eight to 15 orders per day from homeowners.

"I have had letters from do-it-yourselfers who said how easy it was to apply," he said. "I had a letter from one woman who said she and her daughter used it to redo a kitchen."

Three years ago, the company began marketing the product to contractors through licensing agreements. For \$2,900, contractors receive startup materials and exclusive rights to use the product and its name within 25 square miles of their location. According to Stracuzza, the company has licensing agreements with 87 contractors, who receive product at wholesale rates.

"It's a great add-on for a contractor or a carpet guy," he said. "If a homeowner doesn't want to rip up a floor, the contractor can offer this option instead. Or if a carpet guy is installing carpeting in other rooms, he can tell the homeowner how they can

transform their tile floors."

This year, GroutShields contracted with distributors in Ireland and Australia, who buy the product in bulk and distribute it within their countries. Stracuzza has processed requests for close to 10,000 kits overseas, and is now engaged in talks with distributors in Canada and Great Britain. According to Stracuzza, the distributors approached him, after finding his product on the Internet.

Focused on growth, Stracuzza envisions his product being offered in home superstores like Home Depot and Lowe's as well as tile stores. He is considering doing a spot on the Home Shopping Group.

And given the poor economy, GroutShields plans to experiment with a lower price point this summer: \$39.99 for up to 500 square feet.

Stracuzza, who works 75 to 80 hours per week, said he expects to hire additional help within the next two months. He has a part-time administrative assistant, but has been reluctant to share the manufacturing load.

"I feel like it's my baby, and I don't want to let go," he said.

Bernadette Starzee can be reached at starzee@optonline.net

**Groutshields Distributors
9 Madison Avenue
North Bay Shore, NY 11706
(631) 617-6800**
