

## Enterprise

Friday, August 21, 2009

# Father-son team revs up a showroom, e-commerce site



When Rafael Jorge decided to add retail to his wholesale automotive aftermarket business, he didn't do it half-heartedly.

First there's a modernistic \$5 million, 15,000-square-foot showroom along West Sunrise Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale. Next, he's spending \$250,000 to launch an e-commerce site that will offer 1,500 products.

That's not bad for a 53-year-old guy who was a dishwasher and construction laborer when he scraped together \$600 to buy his first car, a 1964 Chevelle.

Go into his Specialty Automotive Treatments (SAT) showroom these days and you can see the Bentley that Jorge drives when he wants to show a little flash – although his day-to-day cars are a bit more sedate. What really brings him joy, though, is his son, Rafael Jorge Jr., who leads the retail operations after earning an MBA from the [University of Miami](#).

“I just give him guidance and he runs the entire staff,” the senior Jorge said.

Al Hendrickson Sr. of [Toyota](#) said: “He's very fortunate because he has a very sharp son who is in business with him.”

Hendrickson said he was impressed by the younger Jorge when he worked as a sale associate for the Toyota dealership.

Although the senior Jorge now says he has a more than \$20 million revenue company with 300 car dealers as customers, his life represents a classic rag-to-riches story.

He was 3 when his single mother moved from Cuba to the Bronx. The family moved south when he was 15, and he graduated from North Miami High School and got an associate degree from Miami Dade College before becoming a manager with [Marriott](#).

In 1979, he took a five-month leave and opened Sun Auto Tops, as SAT was originally named, with a partner in Liberty City. Aftermarket sun roofs were the only product.

He planned to go back to Marriott – and almost did several times, he said. The first six or seven years were a struggle.

“My first payrolls, I used to make them on my credit card,” he said. “I had a \$3,000 line of [Visa](#).”

**Jorge said he always thought of the movie “Rocky.”**

“I knew if I got that one punch in, I’d be able to win the battle,” he said.

The punch was landing [Braman Cadillac](#) at a time U.S. brands still dominated, he said. His product line for the dealers included sunroofs, grills, chrome accessories and fancy spare tire kits that went on car trunks.

#### **Starting in liberty city**

The business left Liberty City in 1983 and stopped in Miami Lakes and Hialeah before Jorge bought his 45,000-square-foot service center in Fort Lauderdale 20 years ago. The store is next door on the former site of a gas station.

The name change came in 2001 to reflect a broader product line. Among the brands are Katzkin, JL, Alpine, Lexani, Forgiato, Strut and Lorinser.

Jorge said he has gained a lot of three-county exclusivity agreements on products, which made a location in Fort Lauderdale central to his growing business.

Hendrickson said, “The best thing about him, as well as having a lot of different products to sell, is he stands behind his products. If you have a problem, he definitely makes it right. I’ve never had a problem with in the 20 years we have worked with him.”

Jorge said business is holding up during the recession because a lot of people still have a love affair with their cars, he said. “A guy driving a Camry values his car even more than a guy buying luxury cars because it’s his only car.”

Jorge is constantly trying to diversify the product lineup.

I never realized how big the wheel business was when I got into it a year ago,” he said.

Now, that business is growing 25 percent a month and generating six figures in revenue. Sets of four can range from \$1,200 to \$18,000 – on the upper end, they’re like owning an expensive watch, he said.

In some ways, the recession has helped business. Jorge says the demise of [wSound Advice](#) and Circuit City has boosted the audio business so much that there’s usually a two-week backlog and he could use some more experienced technicians.

Jorge credits his current expansion kick to his son’s decision to join the family business after getting his bachelor’s degree.

“He never pressured me to come in, and I said ‘This is what I want to do,’” the younger Jorge said.

His father said: “That was the shot in the arm I needed to take the business to the next level.”

They did research, and found some Internet retailers of automotive products were doing up to \$600,000 a month operating out of tiny offices with no inventory.

Jorge said he thought his company’s volume pricing discounts and broad product line would be a competitive advantage.

He hired Oxman Leon five months ago to be head of e-commerce, and he’s spending day after day entering products into the online database

“We are pretty much covering the whole aftermarket,” Leon said.

SAT has added 15 employees since it expanded into retail, and as the headcount has reached 75, the Jorges probably aren’t done yet.

Jorge senior says: “We have a great staff, and that’s the key.”