

RIDING OUT THE STORM

A local Closets by Design franchise is helping New Orleans area residents put their lives back in order in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Michael and Vail Manfre were looking to purchase a business to operate where they could raise their two daughters and spend more time away from the hassles, paperwork and stress of big business, when they decided to purchase an existing Closets by Design franchise in Abita Springs, LA, just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans.

"It was what we were looking for," says Vail. "It was an established business; it had a crew in place; it was a franchise. With both of us coming from corporate worlds, we just

wanted a normal day."

However, normal was not to be in the works, as just three months later disaster struck, when Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest and costliest storms to ever hit the North American mainland, laid waste to the Manfres' entire sales territory of southern Louisiana and Mississippi.

Nearly three years later, and after experiencing hardships that most would find incomprehensible, the Manfres' closet business is not only back on its feet, but thriving,

helping inhabitants of the disaster-struck area rebuild their lives. Their experience in overcoming such severe hardship is a testament to their hard work and dedication. Their story provides not only inspiration, but also advice on emergency preparedness that all business owners can benefit from.

After the Flood

When Katrina was finished and the flooding had subsided, the Manfres found themselves in the midst of a business owner's nightmare.



Products offered by the Manfres' Closets by Design franchise range from custom closets of any size to offices to mud rooms, pantries, entertainment centers and garages.



Finding committed employees helped rebuild the Manfres' Closets by Design business. They also made the sacrifice of not buying a home in order to purchase a new Holzma Optimat HPP 250 beam saw.

Besides dealing with the damage to their shop, home and rental properties, nearly their entire workforce was scattered and unavailable to help keep the business afloat. The employees still in the area were involved in fixing their own homes or finding new shelter, or in some cases searching for lost loved ones. Some employees left the area forever, leaving the void to be filled with people coming into the region from other states, sometimes to help, sometimes with less than the best of intentions.

"It was chaos in its truly worst state," says Vail. "We had business coming in, we just couldn't handle the volume." With Michael spending 20 to 21 hours a day at the shop, partly to discourage looters, Vail running machines while the children slept in the office, and a few trustworthy employees returning to help, the Manfres slowly and steadily began to dig their way out.

"We went into survival mode," explains Michael. "We had to get the business going again, get employees in."

The board on which jobs were posted in the office was full when the hurricane hit, and once phone service was restored, the phones started ringing off the hook from people, many of whom had already paid half their money, wanting their jobs done now. Things were still a mess, but those who could get back in wanted to rebuild immediately. The Manfres had a skeleton staff, were finding it difficult to get materials, had to deal with

insurance companies and pay exorbitant rates charged by profiteering repairmen (\$5,000 to remove one tree). Additionally, roads had turned into mud pits and all the street signs had blown away, making sending installation crews out to find their job site very challenging.

Tensions ran high with frustrated customers and worn out employees.

"Our designers were walking into homes and the people would cry," Vail says. "The stories they had to listen to, the smells they dealt with, the sights they saw. The experience for the entire staff just in day-to-day business was overwhelming."

Although existing business was in place, new business was hard to come by. "How can you sell a closet when there's only a fireplace left standing?" muses Michael. "How do you sell to people who used to work at a casino, and now the casino is gone? People look at this as an opportunity, but what they don't realize is that things are not all coming back."

Through hard work, the Manfres gradually persevered.

The Closets by Design corporate office had never had to deal with such a calamitous situation before, but came through, providing technical assistance and sending experts to help out.

Breaking Through

In a sign of confidence and commitment to making the business survive, the Manfres moved the shop from their 4,500-square-foot location to one double the size. Instead of purchasing a new home, the family chose to buy a new Holzma Optimat 250 beam saw for

the shop and continue living in their 1,200-square-foot cabin while they rebuilt their business.

With a sense of normalcy only now starting to return nearly three years later, Michael says he is finally starting to get things labeled and organized the way he intended to when they first bought the company. Business is not at the same level of the first year, when everyone wanted to build "right now," but things are finally getting to more of an even-balanced schedule. Uncertainties still linger, as people and companies continue to struggle with the decision to stay or move into the area, and much expansion, building and rebuilding is on hold. Spring, however, is typically a "hot" time for remodeling and building, and is a time when many people are focused on getting organized, so the workflow has stayed steady. Additionally, FEMA funds are starting to be distributed in the area, something experts say may keep a possible nationwide



Committed to the success of their company, the owners moved into a new, larger shop, after Katrina.

recession from affecting this territory.

Products offered by the Manfres' Closets by Design franchise range from custom closets of any size to offices to mud rooms, pantries, entertainment centers and garages. Materials available include both standard and exotic colors, melamine and wood, moulding packages, glass doors and other accessories.

The Manfres work with any clientele, from the economically-conscious to the "build-me-dream" type of client. Many clients are obtained from word-of-mouth recommendations or call in from advertising (another



Business owners Michael and Vail Manfre discovered that a company professing to help customers organize can suddenly be thrown into a "new dimension" of organization itself.

source that was badly hurt in the aftermath of the storm), while some stop in to view products in the showroom. Additionally, new home and garden shows have sprung up, providing more sales leads.

The recent disaster has brought about other challenges and changes in the types of jobs being done. New building regulations now require 15-foot concrete pillars in place in certain areas, so "one-story" jobs may not be as simple as before, when it comes to moving material.

Another change the Manfres are seeing is that now more people are wanting more extensive features on their cabinetry.

"Before, we did a lot of standard panels," explains Vail. "Now instead of \$1,200 jobs, we are doing \$3,000 to \$30,000 jobs. People now are wanting things behind doors and in drawers. They are securing their personal belongings much more than before because of what we've been through."

Safe storage of important papers is another lesson that the Manfres feel all business owners should be aware of.

"We're a company that professes to help others get organized," says Michael, "and suddenly you get thrown into a whole other dimension of getting organized yourself. Business owners should realize they need to keep a second copy of things like personnel files at home in some place safe."

The Manfres point out that FEMA's Web site (www.fema.gov) offers a checklist for emergency preparation for businesses. They

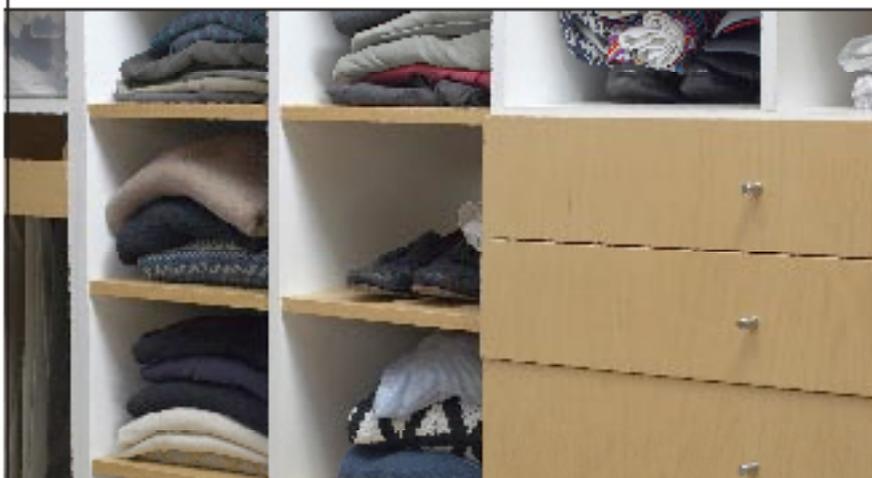
suggest that business owners review the list and incorporate things like backing up computer files and having a backup electrical generator in case of a disaster.

In a story full of ironies, Michael is a former disaster preparedness salesman for ATT (he says companies weren't terribly interested at the time in that topic, pre-Katrina). He re-

counts how he had to call his wife and tell her, "The good news is, you are getting an entire new wardrobe. The bad news is, a tree fell right into your closet." ■

For more on the Manfres' Katrina experience, including some of Michael's photos of the disaster, go to www.closetsmagazine.com.

If You Build These...

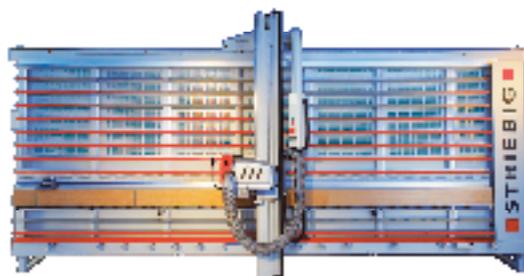


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