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Growth: Enthusiasm is a hallmark of Marx Acosta-Rubio's approach to selling and employee training.

Work Force

Marx Acosta-Rubio has taken on the office supply giants, carving out a growing niche selling toner cartridges and back-up disks

By **LIZBETH SCORDO**
Contributing Reporter

In the age of Staples and Office Depot, the decision to leave one small office supply business and start an even smaller one might appear destined for failure.

But Marx Acosta-Rubio is not one to embrace failure. His **One Stop Shop**, which collects orders of toner cartridges and computer back-up disks and then arranges their delivery, had sales of \$6.5 million last year, a 12 percent increase over the year earlier.

While \$6.5 million barely registers in an office and school supply industry that generated \$341.8 billion in sales last year, consider that superstores **Staples Inc.**, **Office Depot Inc.** and **OfficeMax Inc.** together control less than 9 percent of that market.

That leaves room for tiny competitors such as One Stop Shop.

The business, which has no retail presence, focuses on what Acosta-Rubio calls "office consumables." Three-quarters of its sales come from imaging supplies: toner cartridges for printers, faxes, and copiers, as well as ink jets and ribbons.

Back-up disks generate another 15 percent of sales.

About a year and a half ago, the company's largest distributor began offering "One Stop Shop" private label items, which now account for about 85 percent of what One Stop Shop sells. That provides brand name recognition, but with it the risk of connecting name and product. "You're putting your name on that box and you have to be way confident in it," said Acosta-Rubio.

His staff of 18 — which he expects to grow to 24 this year — is focused on sales and customer service, which, along with concentrating on a narrow slice of the market, helps maintain his base.

While many businesses have become increasingly dependent on online sales, One Stop Shop generates nearly all of its revenues over the phone. Acosta-Rubio's salespeople will call a client with a reminder when, for example, a printer in an accounting office is due for a new toner cartridge.

"The companies who understand the value of their time and need to be doing other things that are more productive buy from us," he said. "The last thing someone in the IT department wants to do is spend three hours a week shopping for a product that he can't find or trying to get an

PROFILE

One Stop Shop

Year Founded: 1998

Core Business: Selling office consumables to businesses

Revenues in 2003: \$5.8 million

Revenues in 2004: \$6.5 million

Employees in 2003: 20

Employees in 2004: 18

Goal: To have brand name recognition associating quality and service with One Stop Shop

Driving Force: The demand from companies who want better service when buying supplies

answer to a question he has."

Acosta-Rubio dropped out of Whittier Law School in the mid-'90s and took a job with a company selling line printer ribbons. Three-and-a-half years later, in 1998, he left the firm and started his own office supply business out of his house.

Service paramount

He called on vendors with whom he had existing relationships and landed his first three clients on his first day of operation. By the fall of 1999, Acosta-Rubio had five employees and moved into a 700-square-foot office in Tarzana. With nine employees crammed into the space two years later, he moved the firm to its current Chatsworth location.

By 2001, One Stop Shop had reached \$2.9 million in sales and two years later it topped \$5.8 million, making it one of the fastest-growing businesses in Los Angeles.

Jarrod Stabnow, a client-relations analyst with EBMS, a Billings, Mont.-based third-party administrator with 250 employees, sends an e-mail or puts in a call to One Stop Shop when he's out of something. If he forgets to check his inventory, he can expect the company to phone him.

"They make sure I'm stocked," Stabnow said. "It's a different approach with them. Everybody else is just out to sell you something. These guys actually get to know you as a client, get to know who you are and what your needs are."

Acosta-Rubio said that a giant like Staples can spend heavily on marketing, but he would rather put dollars into the sales team, which he says keeps the company's customer retention rate at 98 percent.

While not commenting on employee compensation, he said his salespeople are able to make excellent salaries thanks to high sales (and therefore commissions). "Their compensation is directly linked to customer satisfaction and retention," he said. He puts the sales staff through training that includes personal growth books, CDs, seminars and coaching he provides.

Making the team is no simple feat. Acosta-Rubio requires potential hires to go through eight interviews and submit to a personality profile. He can get philosophical about the business, and staff members offer testimonials that working for One Stop Shop has changed their lives.

Alex Armstrong, a sales manager who has been with the company for four years, said that besides providing him with a nice income, One Stop Shop has taught him about business and interpersonal relationships. "Everything I've learned here has transferred to my personal life and increased the quality of my life," he said.