

UP-FITTING THE MOBILE REVOLUTION



It's a brave new world out there. A mobile world. Smart phones, mobile offices — everyone's on the move. And to stay on the move, many businesses require mobility solutions that go well beyond electronic gadgetry. They need wheels. Vehicles that are customized specifically for what they are trying to deliver.

Woodfield Canada is an up-fitting and vehicle customization company that modifies your vehicle to suit your entrepreneurial needs. Starting up in 1996, they are a family business based in London, Ontario.

The business was founded on fixing work trucks, for example, power dump trucks, snowplows and other heavy work and road equipment.

Within a few years, Woodfield discovered a growing niche market in customizing cargo vans and the like. They partnered with Ranger Design, a Montreal company that manufactures custom shelving units for vans and fleets, and began performing custom installations in their London shop. *Spotlight on Business Magazine* spoke with co-owner Jason Hewitt about all the interesting new projects Woodfield Canada is spearheading to keep Canada's workforce on the road to success.



By John Allaire

As one would imagine, Woodfield Canada works predominantly with tradespeople and municipal fleets, up-fitting vehicles for their unique needs. Specifically, people who do H-VAC, air conditioning, plumbing, electrical, as well as municipal water departments and other utilities, to name a few. Their focus is on making com-

mercial vans more efficient and smarter. Hewitt explains, "That's where our slogan of working smarter came from. Our vision is to be recognized and respected as the leader in work vehicle modification. Our mission is to maximize work vehicle efficiency through communication, innovation, quality and customer service."

These key ideas were the business foundations in 1996, and Woodfield continues to build on them today. Expansion almost three years ago into Canada's largest metropolitan area, Toronto, was a natural progression for a company that often deals with corporate fleets. Hewitt points out, "In 2015 we started the location in Toronto. That was largely due to customer demand. A lot of our fleet clients had the bulk of their vehicles in Toronto. So it made sense to open up there and service the customers where they worked."





Nevertheless, Hewitt is quick to stress that no job is too big or too small. "Of course, the bulk of the business remains in servicing fleets because that's where most of the vehicles are that require up-fitting."

And one order translates into 20 or 30 vans or whatever. But we do support the one-offs and the single tradesmen. We have a showroom in both places, Toronto and London, and we have small businesses coming in all day everyday to see what we can offer their businesses. We support the big fleets and the one-man-in-a-van-type operations."

"Maximizing work vehicle efficiency through communication, innovation, quality and customer service."

However, perhaps the most interesting development for Woodfield over the last couple of years is the increasing number of non-traditional mobile businesses looking to take their work on the road, rather than put their shingle up on expensive rented property. Hewitt explains the shifting trend, "In the last two or so years we've been working a lot more with mobile businesses, or helping a standard business become more mobile. It's actually really interesting the things that people come to us with. We have done barber shops, a dog wash/pet spa, physiotherapists, mobile offices for professionals like insurance adjusters, dental hygienists, hearing testers, the list goes on."

He continues to explain that, while the innovative ideas for mobile businesses seem endless, many people would be surprised at how an up-fitted cargo or cube van could be the answer for businesses struggling with rent and location issues. "Typically, we can get many types of businesses into a cargo van. Normally, when someone like that comes to us, we say 'hey what do you need and what does your business

do?' After a bit of a discussion we can put together a full layout. We can help make recommendations on the type of van and the size of van that they're going to need."

It's all a matter of changing perspectives and thinking out of the box — well, maybe thinking into a box!

"Something like a barber shop, you don't need that much space. An office building or small shop in the strip mall, the rents can be very expensive for a very small space. We're finding that more people are finding it much more cost-effective to own a van and drive it around to where their customers are, than it is to own property, especially in large centres like Toronto where commercial rents are through the roof. So we've been doing a lot more of that in the last two years."

Part of Woodfield's offerings comes from partnerships they have established with some of the major automobile manufacturers themselves. This means that you can buy your new cargo van from the manufacturer and have Woodfield up-fit to your specification before taking delivery of the vehicle.

"We are certified to modify vehicles," Hewitt assures. We work with all of the manufacturers directly. So if you buy a new cargo van, you can get an incentive towards up-fitting. That means the manufacturer will cover the cost of the modifications, in many cases. Things like adding basic shelves. That is typically geared towards the tradesmen. For example, with GM, if you buy a new Savana, which is their cargo van, or a pick-up truck, you can get a free rack system through us. We would install and deliver it to the dealership and the end user would pick the van up fully completed from the dealer. We work with all of the vehicle manufacturer's that offer these incentives."

Woodfield Canada makes the process of getting your vehicle up-fitted quite easy and pain-free. Hewitt points out that collaboration with the customer is key. "There are four of us here who work directly with customers on developing their ideas. Normally, what we would do is stand in the customer's shoes. So we go out and look at what they are bringing us to work with, get some specs on the machinery and shelving that has to go into the van, including what kind of power is necessary to run their operation."

Going the extra mile is the name of the game for Woodfield. "We have even spent time with customers while they work to see if we can figure out the best way to modify their van and help them work smarter and more efficiently. Then we can do a layout and show them what the inside of the van will look like."

Not to harp on the technical, because every job is different, but in many cases, a business that is operating out of the back of a van requires electrical power. Hewitt explains that there are three major ways to deal with power issues in a mobile setting.

"First, through a power inverter that is wired into the vehicle

so the engine creates the power. Secondly the system could use a generator. Basically, we would put a wiring system in the van that would be powered from a separate generator. The third way is to wire the power in the van to an outlet on the outside of the van, where you would have to plug into an external power source, like an RV or a camper.

The method we choose depends on how much draw you require to operate your business.

Coming to someone like Woodfield Canada with a specific up-fitting and mobility requirement makes sense mainly because of the experience they bring to the table. There is probably very little they haven't seen when it comes to vehicle modification. In fact, they have created some tried-and-true designs in-house that could be virtually plug-and-play for your industry. Why re-invent the wheel? Woodfield likely has a design for your requirement.

"We have created designs specific to industries that we offer as a starting point," Hewitt says. "Fibre splicing, mobile mechanics, the glass industry, and we even have designs for emergency vehicles. Like a mobile command centre. It's a full mobile office for emergency services so they can pull up at an emergency scene and set up a decision-making centre. There's a big desk in there, there's all the radio equipment, extra supplies, everything the command centre would need in an emergency."

"These are our own designs, and we offer them to these industries. Sometimes it sparks ideas for them to modify our designs. It does make it a lot easier when, for example, a Fire Chief wants to buy a mobile command centre, you can see something that's already pre-made and ready to go with proven track record."

"We support the big fleets and the one-man-in-the-van-type operations."

Like most industries, service is key for longevity. Hewitt explains that service is front-and-centre... ingrained in the company culture, in fact. "Our vision is to be recognized and respected, and part of that is offering the best service to customers. We know that if we want to be the leader in vehicle modifications, a leader is someone who puts the customers first. It is part of our culture. Our vision includes communication which is part of the service. Innovation and quality are a big part of it too."

The free-flow of ideas keeps the company current and relevant. They conduct a "daily huddle" where everyone is encouraged to bring ideas to the table and offer suggestions for improvements. Everyone from a shop tech to someone in accounting can suggest improvements in any area. It's a fresh and inclusive approach to internal stability within the business.



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Moving forward, Hewitt points out that the rubber will continue to hit the road for Woodfield. "We are never merely content with where we are as a business... we are always growing. We don't currently have any plans to open in other cities at the moment. Just Toronto and London for now. So we are more interested in making these locations the best they can be and keep our customers satisfied and coming back."

Woodfield Canada is on the front line of the new mobile revolution. They are poised to arm entrepreneurs with the mobile space they need to compete without bricks and mortar. "Down the road, we see doing a lot more work with mobile vehicles and mobile businesses," Hewitt explains. "Taking any business and making it mobile. We see that as the future. Barber shops, hair salons, a dentist, whatever. We want to be ready to convert a vehicle for the new mobile world. And the best part is we're having fun doing it!" ●

