

Window & Door[®]

www.WindowandDoor.net

The Information Source for the Fenestration Industry

Volume 14, Number 5 | May 2006

THE Replacement Market

SDL Demand Grows
Restoring Failed IG
NOR Laws Spreading



Is There an Opportunity in Failures?

IG restoration company now building dealer base

By Christina Lewellen

When an insulating glass unit in a window or door fails, homeowners have long had the choice of replacing the IG unit, replacing the whole window or door, or living with a fogged unit. A new option is now available, says Crystal Clear Window Works, which is rolling out its “Get the Fog Out” process to the North American market.

According to the company, some (though admittedly not all) IG units can be dried to eliminate the foggy appearance caused by a failed seal and then repaired to recover insulating properties to the unit. Crystal Clear is now franchising this process in the United States and Canada, working to establish a dealer network of trained restoration service providers.

Steve McHugh owns a St. Louis window replacement dealership, and decided to start up an affiliated business to offer the IG restoration process. Rather than take away from his window replacement business, the dealer has actually seen his closing rate go up and his cost-per-appointment go down, he says. “People perceive us not as somebody trying to sell them something but somebody trying to provide the correct solution.”

Guy Selinske has run a glass shop, American Glass & Mirror in Minneapolis, for 21 years. He bolted the Crystal Clear franchise onto his business to better meet the needs of his customers. “We’ve always gotten calls from people asking if we can clean up the moisture in the windows without replacing the glass,” he says.

“The standard answer was no, that’s not possible.” Now, his company is able to evaluate windows’ IG units to see if they can be repaired rather than replaced. “If it’s restorable, we’ll do that.”

Other franchisees had no background in the glass or window replacement industries whatsoever. Jerry Salmans, manager of The Clear Window Co. in Charlotte, NC, stumbled upon

Crystal Clear when he was researching ways to tackle his own home improvement project. “The way I found the service was because my house had foggy windows,” he explains. “The company that made the windows had gone out of business years ago. They’re wood so I couldn’t really replace them unless I wanted to do the whole house. My only choice was to have the glass replaced and I really didn’t want anything disrupting the windows by tearing them apart.”

Realizing that he wasn’t the only homeowner in his area

► “We’ve always gotten calls from people asking if we can clean up the moisture in the windows without replacing the glass.”

facing a similar dilemma, Salmans decided to start up his business, which focuses primarily on de-fogging failed IG units. “Plated glass windows will all fail in time,” he says, “It’s only a question of when. Our observation is people like myself put off having anything done with them, if you have to replace the glass or restore the whole window, because it turns out to be a big project.”



Before and after shots of a window that’s undergone the IG restoration process



Technicians are able to dry an IG unit without disrupting the window frame, making the process a faster and more convenient option for homeowners instead of IG or full window replacement.

THE PROCESS

According to the company, Crystal Clear's restoration concept relies on a 'micro' Defogger valve (a "breathing hole") and seal. Activated by heat and pressure (usually from the sun), the valve allows moisture to vent from inside the chamber to the outside. "Dry air" then recovers the insulating properties to the unit.

Service includes improvements to the aesthetics and performance of the unit including discrete seal reparation, sash repairs and caulking to discourage air leakage and moisture penetration, scratch removal, glass restoration and cleaning.

The founders launched the company in Canada in 2003, with two corporate stores in Ottawa and Toronto. With interest in the process growing south of the border, they opened a U.S. operation in Nashville, TN, in early 2005, says CEO John Hennessy. The company currently has 20 dealers in the U.S. market and expects to jump to about 100 by the end of the year. "It is our intent to have a franchise in each of the 280 major statistical areas of the U.S.," Hennessy says.

NOT REPLACING REPLACEMENT WINDOWS

Hennessy admits that the window, door and glass industries have been somewhat wary of the Crystal Clear process, and there are concerns about its potential impact on their businesses. He and Crystal Clear's dealers assert, however, that the IG restoration process does not present direct competition with replacement windows in most cases. If the window itself has structural damage, or if the window is in an advanced state of failure, the process may not work. "If they have monolithic glass, they're not going to be looking at us," says Jeff Giedt, owner of Window Revision, a dealership that serves the Nashville market. "If they have other problems with the window, wood rot or issues with the balancers breaking, they're looking at replacement windows and not us."

Salmans says his business is often serving customers who bought homes in the last five to seven years. The "builder" windows used in developments—often not top-of-the-line products—are sometimes hard to match, he notes. "You can't just go someplace to find a window that looks like your other windows," he says. "Or, if you have 30 windows

and 20 of them failed, you've got to replace the other 10 so they all look alike. The next choice is replacing the glass, and that's not an inexpensive process either."

It's more likely that the restoration process will pose a threat to the IG replacement industry, rather than window replacement, as it's less expensive. "There's more competition in IG replacement than window replacement," Hennessy says. "But we cannot fix every unit. We cannot get the clarity of the view back again if the glass is damaged."

The company's dealers typically have the ability to

► "We cannot fix every unit.

We cannot get the clarity of the view back again if the glass is damaged."

replace an IG unit themselves, or will contract the job out to another service provider, Hennessy says. "In almost every case a dealer gets invited into a home there will be a replacement that needs to be done. They can be in the glazing business themselves or have a subcontractor and give them the glazing business."

Since American Glass & Mirror became a franchisee, its IG replacement business has actually increased, Selinske reports. While it may be able to restore a portion of a homeowner's failed units, there may be other units the company needs to replace. His company can solve both situations, making him an easy choice for the consumer. "I think it's a good stand-alone business but it makes even more sense to a glass shop because it increases your overall sales. It's just another service a glass company can offer if they want to be a full-service glass company."

Window Revision's Giedt says his customers see the value of having a lower-cost alternative, even if some windows end up needing a new IG unit. "If they've been through the process of replacing glass or windows, the value of what we have is very apparent," he says. "They've been through the higher expenses or the hassle. We com-

► “There are people who prefer we don’t come to market, but there’s a huge problem...”

plement the glazing and even do a lot of glazing ourselves.”

Crystal Clear is now talking to some window and IG manufacturers about how its dealer network can help with warranty issues and repair damage from transportation or installation. “We are in discussions with a number of the top window and door manufacturers,” Hennessy notes, adding that his firm is also exploring the idea of incorporating its valve technology into the manufacture of IG units.

EDUCATING THE MARKET

To get the word out about the restoration service, many franchisees develop partnerships with local real estate agents, building inspectors, property managers, homeowner associations and related companies like window washers. (In addition to working with homeowners, Crystal Clear dealers also serve the commercial and architectural markets.) “Unless a house is being sold, people rarely address the problem,” Salmans observes. “We started off with making sure that the real estate agents know us because people selling houses want to get the problem

fixed. Once we’re in a subdivision with a problem, there may be a lot of other houses with the same problem because it’s the same product from the same builder. So we’ll do flyers in that area.”

Giedt expects that as the dealer network grows, awareness of the restoration option will become more widespread. “Things will just get easier for us because the consumer will begin to understand that this is a repairable problem that can be solved and it needs to be sooner than later,” he says. “It then becomes much more of a maintenance issue than a desperate cry for help.”

FAILURE INFORMATION TO SERVE THE INDUSTRY

Hennessy acknowledges that not everyone buys into the IG restoration concept. Some in the industry question whether the process has gone through enough testing, and others don’t want to draw attention to the number of failed IG units in the marketplace, he suggests. Still, Hennessy stands up to criticism and asserts that the information technicians are gathering in the field—observing what kinds of units fail, how frequently they fail, what products tend to fail in certain situations over others—can provide the industry important data in terms of what’s working and not working. “There are people who prefer we don’t come to market,” he notes. “But there’s a huge problem with regard to failed sealed units. We think we’re going to help the industry because we’re collecting information in the market.” ☐