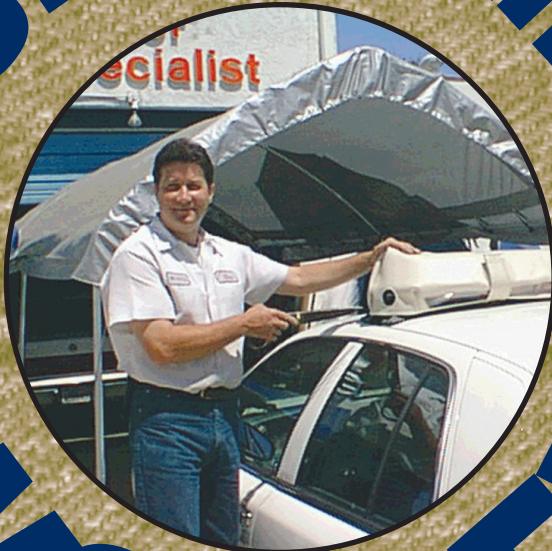




# One Man Wonder



## How Mr. Stitch Beats the Odds With Diverse Services and Internet Marketing

By Greg Basich

The term "one-man shop" often conjures up many negative images in the minds of other trimmers. Such businesses are often branded with the stigma of being a new upholsterer working out of a garage, offering low prices to build a customer base. Another stereotype is that of the breakaway employee, the guy who decided he could do it himself and didn't need anyone else.

Fortunately, neither of these stereotypes applies to Len Vincent's Mr. Stitch Auto & Boat Upholstery of San Mateo, California. As both owner and sole employee, Vincent runs a busy, progressive shop that offers a wide variety of services, from convertible top replacement to sewing



**Mr. Stitch does business out of a small shop with a sales counter up front and an installation bay in the back.**

logos on just about anything. Knowing the frequent ups and downs associated

with the trim business, Vincent makes a point of having a positive attitude and always staying on the lookout for new types of work to take on.

Fortunately, Vincent has had few bad business experiences as owner of Mr. Stitch, although he admitted that when he worked at other shops he'd seen more strange things than he could ever relate in a single interview.

"I've been here at Mr. Stitch since 1986. I've never been sued, never been to small claims court," Vincent said. "I've had one bad check, and that was from a criminal that we had to go to the police department to get the situation taken care of."



The Mr. Stitch Web site is both a marketing tool and a referral service for friends in the industry.



Using mobile advertising gets the word out whenever Vincent runs errands for his business.

## The Online Approach

Vincent added that one way he finds new business is through his extensive use of the Internet as a marketing tool. It helps him generate business across the United States, and in some cases, other parts of the world. He also runs his shop efficiently, scheduling enough time to handle all aspects of managing a business.

Len Vincent is definitely ahead of the game when it comes to the Internet. His site, [www.mrstitch.com](http://www.mrstitch.com), is a showcase for his work and a place for him to network with other businesses. Vincent gets paying jobs by e-mail on a regular basis. "Each day I get at least 10-15 e-mails from around the world," Vincent said. "They fax me out some patterns and with UPS I can do business anywhere in the world."

To handle these numerous and varied jobs, Vincent carefully schedules his time at the shop, making sure he has enough time to get the work done and take care of all the

day-to-day managerial tasks. He works by appointment only, and schedules those appointments a week or two in advance.

"I'm only one guy, so I have to schedule work ahead of time," Vincent explained. "I start light in the day. I tell the public that my hours are 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on weekdays and 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on Saturday. That doesn't mean I'm not here, it's just that I use that time to write a lot of estimates. If there's something special at one of the local body shops, they know I'm here."

By networking with other shops in his area (and in other parts of the country), Vincent established a referral service that helps keep all niches of the automotive aftermarket industry alive and healthy.

"I'm right in the middle of the peninsula in the Bay Area, near the Hayward/San Mateo Bridge," Vincent said. "Locally, I get people from the San Francisco area all the way to San Jose, and then from across the Bay." His shop's central location and

## BUSINESS STATS:

**Owner:** Len Vincent

**Location:** San Mateo, California

**Number of Locations:** 1

**Area:** Suburban

**Services:** Convertible top replacement, headliner repair, custom motorcycle seats, custom amp covers, custom logos sewn into whatever the customer desires, marine upholstery, installation of aftermarket upholstery kits, and basic interior repair work.

**Number of Employees:** 1 (owner and sole employee)

**Years in Business:** 16

**Shop Size:** 1,800 sq. ft.

**Installation Bay Size:** 1,200 sq. ft.

**Sales in 2001:** Great flow of business all year. Many new jobs from the Internet.

proximity to a freeway exit provides a substantial market base and makes the shop easy for customers to find.

### Humble Beginnings

Vincent's background in the industry comes from many years working at a variety of trim shops throughout the Bay Area.

He attributes the quality of his work to his tutelage under the older generation of auto trimmers and some basic education in technical drawing.

"It's not like I have some sort of magical aura around me that helps me figure things out, I'm just a high-school grad," Vincent said. "What really helps me in this



**Boat covers are one type of work that Vincent has done in the past. The wide variety of services, from convertible top replacement and interior repairs to custom logo design, allows Mr. Stitch to stay profitable.**

business was a technical drawing class I took. I learned how to take 3-dimensional measurements and make patterns. I don't know how other guys do this job without those basic formulas. You have to do the job right the first time.

"I've worked for many shops," Vincent continued. "Each of the old guys I worked for had a talent that you could learn. Now, all of the old upholsterers are gone."

Other on-the-job experience at automotive aftermarket companies gave him the real-world training that he would have otherwise missed. That training ended up being invaluable, if not essential, in teaching him the skills needed for modern auto trimming.

"In the 1970s I worked for a company called American Sunroof, one of the original sunroof manufacturers, for \$4.20 an hour," Vincent said. "I learned how to take apart the sunroofs and put them back together. All the different shops I worked at over the years helped me create my business and become Mr. Stitch."

### On The Menu

Today, Mr. Stitch offers convertible top replacement, headliner repair, custom

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motorcycle seats, custom amp covers, custom logos sewn into whatever the customer wants, marine upholstery, installation of aftermarket upholstery kits, and basic interior repair work. This list of services has ensured that Vincent always has work on the bench. Using the Web as a tool to market the business has only

increased the amount of interest the public has in Mr. Stitch's services.

"The special service I offer here is the sewing of logos into peoples' seats, amp covers, and other items," Vincent said. "I've made a page (on the Web site) that shows the different logos and wacky designs I've come up with. The first time I started



Len Vincent, owner of Mr. Stitch, took an aggressive approach toward his shop's presence on the Internet. "I got involved on the Internet in 1998," Vincent said. "Before I even touched a computer, I went out and got a second phone line. Then I went to Office Depot and bought their top-of-the-line computer. I started up with the company Earthlink and made many rookie mistakes, but they have helped me with everything I've done. I also purchased the Mr. Stitch name."

Although he had believed in the value of marketing by taking photos of his work, after getting started on the Web, Vincent decided that the Web was a better way to display his work to the public at large.

"I used to use a 35mm camera to take photos of my work," Vincent said. "I had thousands of photos, but since I bought the digital camera, it's been the way to go. I take a few shots, load the pictures onto my computer's desktop, and then post them on my Web site."

So what do all the referrals he receives from the Web end up costing him? "The Internet costs \$49 a month," Vincent said. He encourages anyone in the business to make use of the Internet. "Think of it as advertising. It's not like you're gambling, you're going to get money back."

Becoming a site that people searching for upholstery shops would see on a regular basis took some work. By listing his services on different automotive service lists on the Internet he has significantly increased the chances of people seeing his site.

"When people look for your type of service, they're going to take what's on the first or second page," Vincent explained. "Unless you go out and manually list your business, your name will come up 30th or 40th."

Strangely enough, Vincent's goal wasn't purely to interest new customers.

"I don't try to make money off the Internet. I use it as a service to help other businesses," Vincent said. This practice has resulted in the evolution of a small network of shops that regularly refer business to one another.

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doing custom logos was in the 1980s, with a logo for the San Mateo Police department," Vincent recalled. "I started cutting out different colors and putting it behind the yardage, sewing it, then cutting it out so the colors would show through." Currently, the logo work Vincent has in his shop is from Indiana and Chicago.

"I do three auto headliners a week," he continued. "All those older people who have old cars have the headliners in their vehicles falling on their heads. I charge them \$160 to \$180, take out the Styrofoam board and recover it, and then pop it back in. I can do that during the day between other jobs. It only takes a couple of hours, maybe three at most.



**Vincent swears by the foam backing he uses on just about every project. He says it gives every job a more professional appearance and longer life.**

"It's easy for any upholsterer to do, even a person who wasn't trained as an upholsterer," Vincent said. "It's easy money for them to get. The sewing machine doesn't come into play in that type of work. The only problem is if it's a Volvo or Saab. Then you have to understand sunroof R and R."

As for convertible top work, Vincent specializes in Mercedes tops, but doesn't limit himself to them, although he prefers Mercedes jobs to other types of work.

"I specialize in Mercedes tops and replacement of seats and interiors. I refer BMWs to **Dan Rogers**, another local guy, who prefers to work on that marque. He tells me that he doesn't like Mercedes. In this business everyone takes a liking to a particular import. In the past year I only did three BMW tops."

Dealership business is somewhat spotty, and at the moment circumspect, for Vincent. "The only time I do dealership work is when dealership representatives come to me," Vincent explained. "I don't pursue them because the local guys in this area are having problems with the unions, and the market is really slow. Since the presidential election, things have gotten really strange. My business is fine, but I hear stories from other people."

### **Networking Works**

Vincent has forged reciprocal business relationships with many of the body shops in his area, and they refer work to him on a regular basis. He has also expanded this network to the Internet, although he says he provides this service

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to help customers more than to gain referrals. As far as Vincent is concerned, the extra referrals are just a fringe benefit.

"There's a company that has a site, [www.autoupholsterykits.com](http://www.autoupholsterykits.com), owned by **R.C. Fryer** in Washington state. He's been around since 1967, so he's really knowledgeable and he's a really nice guy. We have links on each other's sites. I send business to him when I can't handle a job for someone because I'd rather help that person find what he needs instead of just trying to get work out of them. That way when something else comes along that I can do, I trust that he or she will give me a call back."

"I link with World Upholstery, too. You can also help people who are on a budget and direct them to sites on the Internet where they can purchase their own kits." Vincent only networks with people whose work he knows and whom he knows can help a customer.

"I like to be careful who I refer people to. I want those people to come back as customers," Vincent said. "If I get a potential customer 'cold,' who wants something I don't work on, or who is e-mailing me or calling me for info, I'll refer them to the best of the local guys."

The stereotypical one-man shop still prevails in some instances, but the good news is that for every stereotype there are always exceptions. While not always the easiest route for running a business, a one-person shop does have some unique advantages. Scheduling work is easier, quality control is simplified, and there's certainly less overhead. It's a tough approach, but it can work. 

## SOURCE

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