

Business JACKSONVILLE Journal

No job too awkward for packing franchise

BY TONY QUESADA
STAFF WRITER

JACKSONVILLE — If the shoe doesn't fit most shipping and moving companies, Jim Irvin's company will try it on.

Irvin, the owner of Navis Pack & Ship Center, has carved a niche in Northeast Florida handling items other logistics companies can't or won't. In many cases, moving companies shy away because the shipments are too small, and familiar parcel companies deem the items too big. And often companies won't pack them because they are odd sizes or shapes or too fragile to take responsibility for.

"These things need to be packed right. You just can't throw them in" a truck, Irvin said. "That's where we come in."

One of 138 franchisees of Denver-based Navis Pack & Ship Centers, Irvin's location has built 26-foot custom cradles for packing and shipping military airplane wings. It has shipped a 6-foot-tall wooden giraffe, artwork, antiques, office equipment and family heirlooms.

"We get a lot of things out of the ordinary," Irvin said.

Passing the test

Irvin opened his franchise in July 2004 and started getting calls immediately after he announced its presence in the market. "We had referrals before I could get back to the office" after making initial sales calls, he said.

One of the company's first calls was from Pam Auth, who handles personal property from estates administered by Wachovia Trust.

Having just heard of the local Navis, she asked it to take over a job from a company she had lost confidence in. The shipment included a fragile ceramic wall hanging and a grandfather clock from the 1800s that required disassembly and special packaging and coordination on the receiv-

ing end for reassembly. Both items had been in a family for generations. Afterward, the beneficiary was very happy nothing was broken.

"Right off the bat they had a big test," she said. "They passed."

Today, Irvin's location handles about 500 shipments a year and is growing, with a typical shipment involving 10 to 15 packaged items or boxes.

Navis has become Auth's go-to provider for shipments too small for regular moving companies to handle economically, property being divided into multiple shipments to different destinations and odd-shaped or delicate items requiring special packing. She also turns to Navis to ship high-value items because it can secure extra insurance that she hadn't been able to get.

She estimated Navis has handled at least 100 shipments.

Network growing

Navis, the franchiser, a \$30 million company has a mission to grow to about 260 locations in the United States, and it wants to increase its locations in Canada from three to about 30.

"We need to build a larger presence in the major markets quickly," said Ben Blakeley, CEO of Navis Pack & Ship Centers.

"We need some coverage in Orlando, Miami and Seattle. We have some holes in the network where we need to get coverage."

At the same time, the company is very careful about who it sells franchises to because the entire network's reputation can be affected by one bad location.

"We're responsible to the other franchisees to make sure we bring the right people on board," Blakeley said.

Navis can be very selective,



Aaron Davis of Navis Pack & Ship Center works on a box for an outgoing job. Navis custom-builds boxes for large and odd-shaped items.

said Lauren Johnson, vice president of franchise development.

The company generally gets 50 to 70 serious and qualified prospects for each territory in which it announces plans to award a franchise. In some high-demand markets, such as Atlanta, it had more than 100 suitors to choose from per territory.

A Navis Pack & Ship franchise costs \$39,200, which includes the franchise fee, software license

and training. Total investment ranges between \$100,000 and \$250,000, depending on the local market, Johnson said.

After Irvin was downsized from CSX Corp. (NYSE: CSX), he worked with a franchising adviser, who suggested three opportunities, including Navis. Retail franchises didn't appeal to him, so he pursued the one that felt "more like a real business to me."

He appreciates the satisfaction that comes from helping customers solve problems. "It's fun when you figure it out."



Blakeley



Johnson