

## Small fries grow their clout

By using services on approved list, neighborhood cashes in on group discounts



Tom Brien of Spring-Green Lawn and Tree Care works on a yard in Wentworth Park subdivision in North Raleigh, where homeowners who use the service get a discount.

Staff Photo by Takaaki Iwabu

By DUDLEY PRICE, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- Retailing giant Wal-Mart uses its huge customer base to negotiate low prices.

In Wentworth Park subdivision, Fred Brachman works the same principle, leveraging the buying power of 65 homeowners to negotiate lower prices on services ranging from gutter replacement to fitness training.

Brachman, president of the Wentworth Park homeowners association, has signed 25 "partners" -- home-repair service companies and vendors -- who work at a discount for residents of the North Raleigh subdivision off Strickland Road.

To make Brachman's list, partners must sign agreements promising 100 percent customer satisfaction. They include tree-service, general home-improvement, appliance-repair and carpet and flooring installation companies.

Resident Walter Rappold chose Richardson Heating & Air Conditioning of Clayton to replace a furnace after the company submitted a bid \$700 lower than a competitor's.

"It's damn good," said Rappold of the homeowners' program, adding that it has cut his landscaping costs by \$50.

David Richardson, owner of Richardson Heating & Air Conditioning, signed up with the homeowners a month ago after agreeing to keep his \$60 diagnostic fee in place for 12 months. Other firms charge \$85 and up, he said. So far, he

has received a handful of calls and expects business to pick up.

"I'm still competing against the other contractors," Richardson said. "The homeowners will hire whomever they want, but my name is in the pot, and I try to be as competitive as I can."

David Mize, owner of Spring-Green Lawn and Tree Care in Raleigh, had one customer in Wentworth Park before Brachman began circulating his name. Now he's got 25 and said he's not losing money, even with the discount.

Mize agreed to reduce regular rates by 30 percent for Wentworth Park homeowners, but figures he's also saving on marketing costs, which run \$100 for every new customer.

"It's a win-win for me and the homeowners," Mize said.

Brachman got the idea after becoming homeowners association president two years ago. At meetings, residents regularly complained that they didn't know where to get reasonable, reliable services.

About the same time, a real estate agent told the group that the 12-year-old subdivision needed some tree work to improve property values.

When a tree company offered to chop prices substantially in return for getting work from more neighbors, a light bulb came on.

Brachman interviews businesses interested in working in the subdivision. He compares rates and references before circulating the businesses' names.

"People are making more investments than ever in home improvements and repairs because they're so reasonable and convenient," said Brachman.

"This is 100 percent to enhance property values. And property values have gone up more than \$30,000 in the last year, on average," he said.

Brachman spends 15 hours a week researching vendors, but said he gets no payment from Wentworth Park residents or partners. He is exploring the possibility of selling the program to other subdivisions.

Wentworth Park residents are guessing who will be added.

"He's talking about car dealerships," Rappold said. "There's really no limit to the possibilities."

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