



"ARMOR" NOW AVAILABLE FOR TELEVISION SCREENS

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By Kim Predham

HOWELL — Two years ago, Michael Cunningham was just a guy with a new television.

But thanks to an unfortunate meeting between his flat screen and his son's toy truck, Cunningham has become an inventor and owner of a business aimed at helping hapless consumers like himself.

"It's a real simple solution to a simple problem," Cunningham, 38, of Howell, says of his brainchild, the TV Armor screen protector.

The protector, an optical-grade acrylic sheet, was designed to shield flat-panel LCD, LED and plasma televisions from scratches, spills and damage from flying objects such as Wii controllers, toys and balls.

The sheets are generally one-quarter-inch thick and attach to the television with Velcro straps. Felt pad spacers let the protector flex and absorb the impact from objects hurtled at the screen.

Cunningham and his business partner, Tom Marker, began selling the shields in 2007, not long after Cunningham's 2-year-old son, Sean, broke Cunningham's new \$1,800 flat-panel television by throwing a toy firetruck at the screen.

Cunningham was given the choice between buying a new television or ordering a replacement panel for somewhere between \$1,200 and \$1,400. Chagrined, Cunningham fashioned a makeshift screen out of acrylic in his garage.

After some tinkering to refine the original concept, and the support of his friends the Markers, TV Armor was born.

TV Armor's popularity has grown steadily since then, say Cunningham and Marker, with parents of young children and businesses such as bars, hospitals and even sports teams snapping up their product.

Getting the protectors into stores has proved trickier, however.

"They would rather sell you a new TV than sell you a screen protector," Marker said.



Cunningham and Marker have made few inroads into the retail market, though Marker says they have had some success selling to Best Buy on a case-by-case basis.

A rent-to-own chain in Washington has also started carrying the product, Cunningham said.

The pair say they have had more luck with their Internet business, where individual buyers stumble upon them, often after one pricey television has already been damaged. Increasingly, sales are coming through recommendations from satisfied customers, they say.

Trade shows have helped attract commercial business, particularly hotels and motels looking to protect their fancy televisions from guests and cleaning crews. Hospitals and schools have bought the shields. And to their surprise, most of the National Hockey League teams have ordered the protectors for their locker rooms, Marker said.

Marker won't say how many units they have sold, but since launching, they have moved headquarters twice — once from Cunningham's garage to a Howell business complex, then again to a larger space in the same complex.

"We used to think 10 (orders) a day were a lot. We're well beyond that," Marker said.