

TONY'S CANVAS & LEATHER

IN FEATURE ARTICLE ON FORBES.COM

Finding Your Next Gig In Your Garage

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Inspiration and hard-won insight from home-hatched entrepreneurs.

Tony O'Geen, 51, Tony's Canvas and Leather, Massena, N.Y.

Thirteen years ago, O'Geen got into a really bad car accident. Unable to go back to work as a corrections officer, but needing an income to support his young family, he began considering self-employment. "I was always reading about people starting a business doing what they are good at," he says. "The only thing I knew I was pretty good at was repairing my son's hockey equipment. In fact, his whole team relied on me for keeping their equipment in shape."

In 2001, during the last recession, O'Geen started searching online for industrial sewing machines that he could set up in his garage; he settled on a supplier across the Canadian border. "I started out making and repairing boat tops and continued repairing my son's [team's] hockey equipment," he says. "I also learned how to re-palm hockey gloves because it is like a lost art."

O'Geen's biggest challenge: marketing. "I knew there was a need locally for what I do [hockey is a way of life in upstate New York], but I wanted to go nationally," he says. "I was reluctant to invest much time and money in the Internet at first." Eventually he had a Web site designed (tonyscanvas.com), though it didn't bring in any sales in the first year.

Frustrated but resilient, O'Geen took a Web design course offered by a local economic development agency. "Now my canvas hockey bags are on the first pages of [Google](#) ([GOOG](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)), which has doubled my bottom line," he says. "Looking back, the only mistake I made was not marketing my business using the Internet sooner."

Solid customer service helps too. As soon as the work is completed, O'Geen loads up his truck and drives the reconstituted equipment to the team's rink. "I have always tried to deliver my work whenever I can," he says. "I think the extra effort pays off. If I can solve a customer's problem and make it really easy for them, it will lead to more work."

Indeed, the increased demand has forced O'Geen to hire on his first employee: "I trained my 15-year-old son, Zeppy, how to sew," he crows. "He is my bag man now."

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