

Dulles startup company puts tires online, on cars

By Ben Hammer
Staff Reporter

David Leslie and Pat Garvey think the tire-buying public is ready to turn their wheels to the Web.

So the co-founders of a Dulles Internet company are ready to change the way people buy new tires — and to capture a piece of a \$14.7 billion market in the process.

The concept is simple: TireVan sells tires on its Web site (www.tirevan.net), then sends a technician to the customer's car to install the tires.

"If you look at the experience of buying tires the old way, it's a negative experience," Garvey says. As it takes away from your time, it robs you of your transportation."

Investors like the idea, too. The company, which started its service in January, secured \$250,000 in seed funding in late August and hopes to raise another \$1.5 million to \$2 million in venture capital by June.

The money likely will go toward funding TireVan's expansion. The company plans to start providing service in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Atlanta and Charlotte, N.C., by next summer.

"We're figuring out what one market looks like for TireVan," Garvey says.

Tire purchases by Americans total \$14.7 billion annually for passenger cars and \$4 billion for light trucks, according to *Modern Tire Dealer* magazine.

Leslie thought of the concept in 2003 after trying unsuccessfully to find a company online that would sell and install tires for his two GMC Suburbans. He brought the idea to Garvey, a pledge class brother at the University of California, Berkeley's Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity.

He and Garvey visited equipment manufacturers to learn how to mount and balance tires and adapt machines for use in a truck.

The duo tried a limited test run of the concept last year, personally installing



ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE: TireVan co-founders Pat Garvey, left, and David Leslie hope their Internet company can convince people to order new tires online and let the young company install them.

about 150 tires. They took a break to retool the business and relaunched this year.

"It was fun, but it kicked my butt, Garvey says. I'm definitely too old to do it day-in and day-out."

He and Leslie no longer change tires, but they continue to focus on the details of making the mobile model work. TireVan would generate a nice chunk of revenue even if the company only gains a tiny share of a market dominated by retail stores such as Mr. Tire and Merchant's Tire and Auto Center.

"We're not really worried about being able to take business away from traditional tire stores," Garvey says. "We're just worried about being able to do it in a profitable way."

Their prices are competitive with rates quoted at a several area stores. The company says it saves on storefront rent and overhead and avoids inventory costs by ordering tires as customers buy them.

TireVan is courting not only individual

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Pat Garvey, co-founder of TireVan

consumers but also employers looking to offer another benefit to workers. The company generates about half its sales from employees of 20 area companies including America Online and Weichert Realtors. Eventually, TireVan may resell products and services such as roadside assistance plans and wheels.

"Establishing trust and a brand gives us an opportunity because we automate transactions to reach out to consumers at multiple times and in a very cost-effective way," Garvey says.

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