



Mall Carwashes Gaining In Popularity

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ORLANDO -- Shoppers at the Florida Mall see them all the time. They have been described as "egg-mobiles" by some and "mini-spaceships" by others. The odd-looking, orange-and-black carwashing carts are part of the ProntoWash franchises sprouting at shopping malls throughout the country, *The Free-Lance Star* reported.

The concept is simple, but quickly catching on: Offer customers the opportunity to have their cars washed and detailed while they are busy shopping in the mall.

Robert de la Plaza says his franchise at the Florida Mall has been doing a steady business during its first two years, but is now poised for growth. A native of Venezuela who has lived in Central Florida for 14 years, De la Plaza, 28, says he owns and operates the franchise along with his brother-in-law Daniel Montoya and his wife, Dunia.

"I was completely inexperienced when I got into this business," says De la Plaza. "People tell me that if you make it past the first two years you're going to be successful."

Shoppers can take their cars to two ProntoWash hubs at the Florida Mall -- one near the food court and another near the valet parking area. Services range from a basic carwash from as low as \$12 to complete detailing that could cost more than \$100 depending on the size of the vehicle. It takes ProntoWash an average of about 30 minutes to complete a service.

De la Plaza says business has picked up since the hubs were launched with their snappy signage. He says that when he started, employees would take carts throughout the parking area offering services.

"The hub makes it more appealing," De la Plaza says. "It makes it look more like a business. I would love to see the business do well so I can open another franchise."

Larry Kruguer, chief executive officer of Miami-based ProntoWash USA, says two more franchises will be opening in Orlando by midyear. Kruguer says the company's goal is to grow from its present 17 operations to 50 nationwide by the end of the year.

"We offer people convenience," Kruguer says. "People today are very busy, and many times both parents work. We give them service in a very professional manner while they go on with their activity."

ProntoWash, which was started in Argentina in 2001 by Sergio Kompel, has a strong international base with more than 225 franchises in South America, the Caribbean and Europe, including Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain and Portugal.

It is no coincidence that ProntoWash, with its branding power in Latin American countries, would open U.S. franchises in areas with large Hispanic populations in Florida, California and Texas.

However, Kruguer expects U.S. franchises to spread into different areas as ProntoWash signs partnership deals with more mall management groups, which include Simon Properties, Mills Properties, General Growth Properties and others.

Billie Scott, a spokeswoman for Simon Properties, says the company feels the ProntoWash service is a good fit for its malls. "Customers like it," Scott says. "It allows them to get one more thing done in a very convenient way."

Kruguer says the overall investment for a franchise at a mall ranges from \$50,000 to \$80,000, while a franchise at a corporate location (office buildings, supermarkets, hospitals, airports, etc.) range from \$30,000 to \$45,000. He says sales range from \$15,000 to \$60,000 a month.

De la Plaza says customer service is the key to success in the business.

"It's not what we do, but how we do it," he says.