

# BUSINESS FIRST

GREATER LOUISVILLE'S DEFINITIVE SOURCE OF LOCAL BUSINESS NEWS

Vol. 21 ■ No. 38

May 6, 2005

## Home owners, small businesses latch onto **iCarpetiles concept**

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### Small Business Snapshot



### **iCarpetiles.com**

BY SARAH JEFFORDS/ BUSINESS FIRST STAFF WRITER

**Company description:** A business that sells carpet tiles primarily to residential customers and small businesses via the Internet

**Headquarters and warehouse:**

3320 Gilmore Industrial Blvd.

**Owners:** Eric Johnson and Linda Johnson (pictured)

**Employees:** Four full time; four part time

**Web site:** www.icarpetiles.com

**Phone:** (502) 810-0233

**Product:** Carpet tiles are squares of commercial-grade carpet — available in 18-by-18-inch or 2-by-2-foot sizes — that can be installed by the end user for wall-to-wall carpeting or for area rugs; material cost ranges from 49 cents to \$1.99 per square foot

**Average amount of carpet tiles purchased each month:** 120,000

pounds, or three truckloads

**Average number of orders filled each week:** 500, which includes sample requests

Neat stacks of carpet tiles — sorted according to size, color and pattern — line the work tables and shelves in iCarpetiles.com's 15,000-square-foot warehouse on Gilmore Industrial Boulevard.

Destined for homes, boats, offices and small retail outlets across the country, the carpet squares have become a popular alternative to traditional roll carpeting, said company owner Eric Johnson.

Johnson, a veteran of the flooring industry, launched the carpet tile business nearly five years ago as a division of his commercial carpet company, Eric Johnson Enterprises Inc.

At the time, he said, carpet tiles primarily were used in large commercial jobs. But there was a growing demand for the product in the residential and small-business sectors.

Johnson stepped in to fill that niche by expanding on his existing relationship with carpet manufacturer Lees Carpet, a division of Georgia-based Mohawk Industries Inc.

The iCarpetiles.com division began buying Lees' production overruns by the truckload and then reselling the carpet tiles at discounted

### **Q&A with the owners**

*Eric Johnson, and his wife, Linda Johnson, who is a partner in the business, answered the following questions about how they were able to combine Internet convenience with personal interaction:*

#### **How does iCarpetiles.com distinguish itself from other Web sites that tout similar products?**

**Eric Johnson:** When the company got its start, "the Web sites that were out there were pretty primitive, and they didn't take into consideration what customers were asking for. ... People are interested in information. They want to know about the product — how to install it, unique ways to use it and different designs. ... We try to help people find what's best for them."

#### **People typically want to see and touch carpet before purchasing it. How do you give customers that same experience?**

**Eric Johnson:** "Customers can request samples, and we send the sample swatches to them at no charge with no obligation to buy. Orders go out that same day. The response time is absolutely imperative because customers are not dealing with someone they know a whole lot about. They want to feel comfortable with whoever they are dealing with in cyberspace."

#### **With an Internet company, it can be easy to lose the personal connection with the customer. How has iCarpetiles.com overcome that obstacle?**

**Eric Johnson:** "The personal attention is very important. The mini-lots (very small quantities) are the only product that customers can point and click and order. Everything else is done over the phone, and each order is handled personally. It does take more time to do that, but we are building the business on much firmer footing."

**Linda Johnson:** "We've found that because of that personal touch, business from repeat customers and referrals has increased. When you start getting several orders from a certain ZIP code, you can tell that people have been talking to each other."

prices via the Internet.

The business "grew like wildfire," Johnson said. In March 2003, he spun off the division into a separate business entity.

Although he declined to disclose revenue figures, iCarpetiles has seen its sales quadruple in the past year and a half, and Johnson expects the rapid growth to continue during the next 18 months.