

# Savvy Products & Marketing Establish a Robust Specialty Niche



*“With great strategies and great products,  
you can not only survive, but really thrive  
even in a slow market.”*

Mark Shafer, owner of Egress Solutions



Model #2062 with polycarbonate cover.



When it comes to successful marketing, strategic remodelers are finding ways to differentiate themselves with the addition of new services. Developing and marketing a new specialty allows remodeling businesses to meet the needs of more customers and become the go-to authority in a specialty niche.

Mark Shafer, owner of Egress Solutions in Leonard, Michigan is one such remodeler who's earning steady business and many referrals after establishing his specialty, and building awareness. After 20 years in kitchen, bath and basement remodeling, Shafer found that a new building code for basement egress systems created a specialty that no one was serving.

"When the code change requiring egress windows for finished basements started, I immediately heard requests for them," Shafer says. "The first one I put in was a pain in the neck." He dug the hole by hand, used a wheelbarrow and hired somebody to do the concrete cutting. "I was stuck with a big chunk of cement in the hole. I had to rent a jackhammer, break it out and haul it away by hand." That first egress system took a week.

Today, Shafer's two-man crew does the job in a day and has egress installations down to a science. "The code was being enforced and everyone was going to need them. I knew it was going to take off." He turned his business

into Egress Solutions and has been specializing in installing egress systems in existing homes since 2004.

Shafer says he mulled over the business transition for about a year before seizing the opportunity and making significant investments. He bought a dump truck, a Bobcat with backhoe attachment and cement-cutting equipment, including a hydraulic track-mounted wall saw. He now averages three jobs a week within his 100-mile territory and says he had work every week last winter.

"The majority of homeowners contact me because they found out that they needed to meet code," Shafer says. "They're in the middle of a remodeling project, and suddenly the building inspector says 'you need an egress window'—and they've never heard of them." His one-day egress installation ends up surprising many homeowners along with some contractors who've installed them before without specialty equipment. "Sometimes they don't believe me, and then they're happily surprised by the end of the day when I'm packed up and done," Shafer notes.

Shafer says he uses Wellcraft Egress Systems' polyethylene wells for about 90 percent of his jobs, along with some galvanized steel wells and wells custom-built with pavers. "If homeowners see a cheap well next to a Wellcraft well, for a couple hundred dollars more going into their house

they choose the Wellcraft well. Their quality is great," he says, adding that he's had zero callbacks with several hundred Wellcraft installations.

"Homeowners tell me they love having the egress window and wish they'd have done it years ago," Shafer notes. "They like the fresh air and sunlight they get downstairs."

Since Shafer's initial foray and success with installing egress systems, their importance as a way to escape fire has grown. According to the 2006 International Residential Code, egress windows and wells must be installed in each basement-level bedroom as well as in other basement living spaces. With these egress systems, even young children can quickly escape danger, and fully-equipped firefighters can enter and exit a home through the basement.

#### **A well-done setup**

Shafer conducted thorough research in transforming his business for the egress specialty niche. That included practice. After choosing the back-saving track-mount saw, he formed a 10' x 8' cement wall on his rural property and had a dealer rep show him how to set up the saw and make cuts.

Then to market his specialization, he reached out to Wellcraft Egress Systems and explained his new business focus. He'd previously used Wellcraft wells on his basement remodels and

liked the product. After hearing his strategy to exhibit at several home shows, the company gave him wells to display. “After that first show,” says Shafer, “I had customers signed up right then and there and I was ready to go to work.”

#### **Filling the need**

There are myriad uses for basement living areas: home offices, bedrooms, home theaters and recreation rooms. Shafer has also seen growth in customers using basements for kids’ playrooms and in-home day-care operations. “Egress window wells really change the appearance of a basement. Getting that natural light down there, you don’t feel like you’re in a basement as much and it creates a more livable area. I get a fair amount of people who, even though they could meet code with one window, prefer two or three to bring light into the basement and eliminate a dungeon feel,” Shafer notes.

“In most basements during the middle of the day you’ve got to walk downstairs and turn the lights on to see. When you put an egress window in, you get enough light so that you can walk downstairs without turning the lights on.”

#### **The business forecast**

Shafer says the business forecast for his specialty is good, and he’s even given some thought to adding a second crew. “To do these right, you’ve really got to be hands on. I’m right where I want to be,” he admits. The specialization was easy for him to learn and the niche focus means each job is essentially the same, eliminating questions about work or materials. His equipment is meticulously organized so that each job is finished as quickly as possible.

Shafer maintains a schedule of four Detroit-area home shows a year, which make up a large portion of his marketing along with his website.

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5600 Shown with optional lattice cover.



2062 Shown with optional polycarbonate cover.



2060 Shown with optional polycarbonate cover.



2067 Shown with optional polycarbonate cover.

His booth display recreates the feeling of standing in a basement and looking at a finished egress system installation, including drywall and trim. “The fact that people see my display, open the windows and see exactly how it works really helps them out. I met a lot of homeowners that way, and a lot of smaller contractors who do two or three basements a year and call me.”

Shafer stays in touch with his Wellcraft distributor, whom he has worked with on marketing and technical advice. “With a specialty like this, you have to know your product inside and out,” Shafer says, “and find out who else in your area is doing it—then improve on that and set yourself up better.” Through his website, home show exhibitions and referrals, he’s consistently working 8 to 10 jobs out on the calendar.

“When I started, I had no intentions of being the cheapest guy out there,” Shafer says. “I wanted to put the best product in for the best price, so I don’t cut corners with materials. I use good wells and good materials.”

#### Installing an egress system

First, Shafer lays down plywood to protect the homeowner’s yard. At the well site he removes the sod and hand

digs to find any sprinkler lines, which will be rerouted after the well installation. Most of the well hole, averaging about five feet, is dug with the Bobcat’s backhoe, then it’s more hand-digging to tee into the existing weep tile drain. All the dirt goes into an 8’x6’x2’ dirt pan that Shafer built to keep cleanup fast and easy. Some of the job’s 3 cu. yd. of pea stone is used to fill the hole up to the bottom of the well, then the sawing starts. A round blade is used on the track-mounted wall saw, which is mounted onto the piece of cement wall that ends up being sawn out. The corners of the wall are cut with a chainsaw to avoid over-cutting with the wall saw. The cement block is hauled out by the Bobcat, and then it’s time to mount the well.

Several large wedge bolts and fender washers are used on each side to mount the well; Shafer uses sleeve bolts for block walls. The well is backfilled completely with pea stone, except for the last 6 in. which is backfilled with soil. While one crew member backfills around the well, the other frames and installs the window, and the well cover is installed. The sod is then replaced, the yard is cleaned up and the protective plywood is removed.

#### Steady success

“I’m one-hundred percent happy with my business decision,” Shafer notes. “Especially with Michigan’s economy, a lot of general contractors can’t find work. It’s just a tough place to work right now.”

Shafer’s success hasn’t gone unnoticed by Wellcraft and its parent company, The Tapco Group. “Mark has proven that you can expand your business in a down market. He’s done it right, and he’s winning the battle,” says Jonathan Wierengo, Director of Marketing for The Tapco Group. “With great strategies and great products, you can not only survive, but really thrive even in a slow market.”

Wellcraft<sup>®</sup>  
egress systems

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