

# Window business passed down from father to son survives tough times

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6:05 AM, Oct 7, 2015



Like so many do, Ben Crotteau followed in his father's footsteps when it came time to decide on a career.

Unlike so many others, however, the owner of Suncoast Blinds & Tinting in Fort Myers managed to find a silver lining in the Great Recession that began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.

"It was extremely challenging, no doubt about it," said the 35-year-old Wisconsin native whose business specializes in plantation shutters and a wide variety of other window treatments and tinting. "But the nice thing about the downturn was that it weeded out a lot of our less-than-honest competitors. So, by and large, window fashions went back to being honest, where businesses provided a good day's work for a good day's pay."

Six years later, Crotteau said business is as good as it's ever been since he took over operations from his father, Gene, in 2006.

"It was hard, I'm not going to lie about that, but we stuck around and stuck to it, so we're back to action and seeing numbers we saw before the bust," said the recent newlywed and father of two.

The child of divorced parents, Crotteau said he learned the industry while visiting his father during the summers.

"We go back two generations now," he said of the timeline for the family business. "My father started a home-improvement business in Wisconsin, but like most snowbirds eventually got sick of the snow and came to Southwest Florida full-time to start up AAA Blinds and Verticals in the late 1980s."

During those summer visits, Crotteau said he was exposed to the ins and outs of the business.

"From the time I was 10 to about 15 or 16 years old, I would come down to help hang vertical and mini-blinds," he recalled. "That was good for me, because I got to meet a lot of people and manufacturers in the industry that way."

By 1992, Crotteau's father had opened Suncoast Blinds & Tinting.

"I came down full-time in 1999, and started buying out my father piece by piece until I took over in 2006," Ben Crotteau said.

Crotteau said he now makes about 10 stops a day in the course of his work.

"We get about three new clients every working day, so about 15 new clients a week times 52," he said when asked to provide annual numbers for his projects.

Of his company's signature offering, Crotteau said plantation shutters are a cut above all other window treatments.

"I call them furniture for your windows," he said. "Plantation shutters are bigger, better, bolder and nicer while also providing functionality and stability for your windows. Once you put them on, you never put them on a window again, so it's not like a service business where we see the same clients over and over again for the same windows."

Which isn't to say he doesn't receive repeat business, Crotteau said.

"In Southwest Florida, people turn over their homes quite a bit, so even though we don't work on the same windows, our clients call us to fit window treatments in their new houses," he said.

Suncoast clients said they couldn't be more pleased with the service they receive on both residential and commercial projects.

“They’re up-to-date on the latest technology and always responsive to customer-service issues,” said David Toliver, co-owner of Foxworthy’s Interiors in Bonita Springs. “Ben is very pleasant to work with, and he’s a good guy, too. I’ve really enjoyed working with him on a number of projects over the past six or seven years.”

Kevin Steffanni of Kevin Steffanni Design Group in Naples echoed those sentiments.

“My experience with Suncoast Blinds started with Ben’s father, so it’s been over the last 25 years now,” the Cleveland native said. “It’s been great to see Ben take over the business and move forward in the same direction, and I have nothing but positive things to say about all aspects of his business.”

Crotteau said exciting developments have transpired for his business over the past year.

“We partnered with Lee County to provide shades at Hammond Stadium, spring training home of the Minnesota Twins, and we got the Nordstrom’s contract at the Mercato in North Naples,” he said. “We’re also currently the exclusive shutter supplier for The Arlington, the retirement community they’re building near Lely Resort in Naples.”

As for the future, Crotteau said he would like to grow his business organically.

“I’d like to expand to give us a bigger footprint and to make sure clients in Southwest Florida get the best shutter experience in town,” he said. “But I’d like it to be a nice, slow, measured growth that doesn’t sacrifice the service people get from Suncoast Blinds.”

For more information, call 239-495-6558 or see [www.suncoastblinds.com](http://www.suncoastblinds.com).

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