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Sun Harvest - 11/23/2007

Sun Harvest

T&I Sarasota/Bradenton Winner

by Mark Gordon | Managing Editor

A walk on a golf course got an antsy retired executive thinking about the power of the sun. The rays hatched a new business.

Ken Chester's otherwise pleasant afternoon of golf four years ago in Sarasota was sufficiently spoiled on the 15th hole when the electric cart he was riding pattered to a stop. It was out of juice.

Chester and his fellow golfers walked the rest of the way. But Chester, a retired pharmaceutical executive who was also a four-star member of the 'retired-too-early club,' couldn't walk away from how silly the whole thing was. He was riding a generic cart that not only had no brand identity, it didn't even get him from A to B.

So Chester combined his business and marketing expertise, which included running an import/export company with ties to China, with an idea so simple, it was surprising no one had done it yet: Solar powered golf carts. Four years later, Chester, 61, has solved more than just the golf cart problem. He formed a company, Sarasota-based Cruise Car, which manufactures and sells a variety of solar powered vehicles. The list ranges from basic two-seaters to custom made utility truck-style vehicles to even four-speed, 14-seat mini-busses, one of which was recently bought by Disney Hong Kong to transport park visitors.

"It's not just about golf carts," says Chester. "We provide people with lifestyle vehicles."

Chester's timing is hole-in-one perfect. Gas prices nationwide are at all-time highs and so is interest in transportation that doesn't rely so heavily on fuel.

Potential customers and the green crowd also aren't the only ones to have taken notice of Cruise Car. The company and its carts have been mentioned in the Wall Street Journal, on the CBS Early Show and on CNN Radio. "Solar is no longer a convenience," says Chester, quoting what he plans on making the company's marketing tagline. "It's an absolute necessity."

'Street legal'

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The Cruise Car business model is based on finding dealers, both nationwide and globally, to sell both the carts and solar panels that can be retrofitted to work on traditional, electric-powered carts. In the last year, Chester has signed up dealers in California, Louisiana and Arizona, as well as several in Florida. International markets Chester would like to be in include Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Spain.

But nowhere is the power of Chester's solar-powered product more at full force than inside the Villages, the massive Central Florida retirement community that's home to both lots of seniors and lots of golf carts.

Gordon Oldham, who runs one of about 35 golf cart shops in the Greater Villages area, became a Cruise Car dealer earlier this year.

"It makes perfect sense here," Oldham says, adding that many customers use the carts for daily errands and trips, not just on the golf course. "We pretty much sell every one we can get our hands on."

Cruise Car carts can go, on average, about three hours before running out of juice, traveling as fast as 25 mph. The distance traveled per trip, Chester says, ranges from 37 to 60 miles, depending on the amount of batteries.

Chester designed the carts to meet a state's low-speed vehicle regulations, which include having seat belts, headlights, turn signals and a sturdy tempered glass for a front windshield. The carts even have a working horn.

What's more, other carts in the Cruise Car product line are designed to be "street legal," Chester says, and are registered under the national VIN system.

Here's how the Cruise Car carts work: A panel with solar cells strong enough to charge a 36- or 48-volt battery system is inserted facing upwards into the roof of the cart. When exposed to direct sunlight, the panel produces a continuous charge of 3 amps. A wire connects the panel down the back of the cart into a pack of batteries placed under the seats. The batteries then power the vehicle.

For doubters or the scientifically curious, Chester uses an old lamp and a kitchen mixer as demonstration props. He plugs the solar panel into the mixer and lamp and immediately, the mixer begins churning and the lamp starts burning.

Prices vary, from about \$3,500 for a basic Sunway Cruise Car to \$15,000 for the 14-seater, called a Kudo – named for congratulating people for buying a solar powered "green" vehicle. Chester points out customers are entitled to a 30% solar investing federal tax credit on a Cruise Car purchase.

The only 'duck'

Chester declines to release sales figures, only saying the company tripled year-over-year sales in 2007 and he expects to do at least that well next year. The company has eight employees, who work out of both a showroom in a Sarasota industrial park and a factory in Venice.

Chester initially founded the company in 2003, but he didn't completely open for business until 2005. Says Chester: "I didn't want to make any early mistakes."

That cautious approach hasn't prevented Chester from being successful in other parts of his business life. The New York native retired to Sarasota after working in several executive jobs with drug companies, including Pfizer.

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After moving to Sarasota with his wife though, Chester says in a matter of “micro-seconds, I twitched out.”

His salvation was to get into businesses he knew little about. He bought some land in Sarasota, near Stickney Point Road and U.S. 41, and developed a small shopping plaza. He bought a bar, the Boar’s Head Lounge, in the Gulf Gate neighborhood of Sarasota.

Chester also became involved with the import/export business, ultimately starting a company that would serve as a conduit for Cruise Car. Using contacts in China, Chester teamed up with a manufacturer selling parts for solar-based cars.

Back in Sarasota, Chester found Tom McCoy, who had been working in solar power for almost 20 years. McCoy and Chester created a streamlined manufacturing system where they take some parts made in China, combine them with a few parts made in the company’s Venice plant and build a solar powered cart.

Chester says his biggest challenge is also the company’s biggest selling point: Gas prices. Sure, high gas prices create interest and Chester hopes, sales. “Everyday they raise the price of fuel,” says Chester, “these phones ring off the hook.”

But Chester also has to pay those same high gas prices when shipping parts and completed carts. It has made some shipments, especially ones of singular custom-made vehicles, Chester says, almost cost prohibitive. Other challenges linger. One is a time delay in manufacturing parts in China that can be as long as two months. The American dollar fluctuation also worries Chester.

One aspect that doesn’t seem to worry Chester is competition. Traditional golf cart companies, many of which are in Florida, aren’t big competitors, Chester says, since Cruise Cars have advanced the product. And good old regular car dealers, Chester says, even the ones trying to make solar powered vehicles, aren’t much of a threat to Cruise Cars, either.

“If you want a duck, go get a duck,” says Chester. “But if you want to get a different duck, I’m it.”

REVIEW SUMMARY

Business: Cruise Car, Sarasota

Industry: Automotive, leisure

Key: The company, which manufacturers and sells solar powered golf carts, hopes to increase sales by capitalizing on people’s frustration over high gas prices.

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