

Fireman markets expertise

By Matt Wrye
Staff Writer

Even when he's off-duty, Brent Berkompas is fighting fires. Not with a heavy-duty water hose, nor a fire truck.

He's not even suiting up.

Instead, this San Bernardino Fire Department firefighter is on the forefront of a new era in fending off flames — and he's making cash in the process.

Berkompas calls it Brandguard Vents, a company he and his wife created after the Old and Grand Prix fires scorched the foothills and mountains of San Bernardino County in 2003.

His vent design catches hot embers, the same kind that flew into so many homes during the Slide and Grass Valley fires in 2007 and burned them from the inside out.

For years, builders have installed structure vents that fit the purpose they're made for, but they're like open windows for smoldering debris.

"When I saw 500 structures in San Bernardino (city) burn within 24 hours (in the Old Fire), it's a numb feeling you get," Berkompas said. "There's no way to put into words how you feel about those people in your community who lost those homes. It's surreal."

With new home construction slumping, Brandguard's wholesale dealers are mostly selling to contractors and homeowners eager to replace their old vents with the company's ember-catching fixtures.

But when the real-estate market gains steam again, Berkompas could be sitting on a gold mine.

The state's fire agency, Cal Fire, is enforcing a new code that says vents under eaves can't be installed unless they stop flame and burning embers from entering a home's attic.

Homes built within Cal Fire's designated Fire Hazard Severity Zones — geographic zones that are prone to burn if a wildfire hits the area — must comply with the new code.



Khai Le/Correspondent

Brent Berkompas is with the San Bernardino Fire Department, but four years ago he started Brandguard Vents, a manufacturer of vents designed to catch hot embers.

Brent Berkompas

Shop: Brandguard Vents, 1001 Avendia Pico, Suite 221, San Clemente, (949) 481-5300, www.brandguardvents.com

Occupation: Owner

Age: 35

Education: High school diploma and

some college

Resume: 12-year firefighter and paramedic

Favorite music: Punk rock

Favorite reads: The Surfers Journal

Mentor: Jake Berkompas, uncle

"The majority of homes are being built in these areas, because this is where the available land is," Berkompas said. "Home builders and developers were so busy two years ago, you couldn't get a meeting with them. Now they're opening up to us."

The entrepreneur is putting it all on the line for a product he believes in. He's cashed in his retirement account to fund Brandguard, and

his wife even left a sales and marketing job with Procter & Gamble to market Brandguard instead.

"We're starting to see a return on investment," Berkompas said. "But there's a grand canyon between your ideas and the objective. It's definitely a labor of love."

Competitors, no doubt, will fight for market share against Brandguard, but Frank Lemmo thinks Berkompas is on to something unique.

"The market is more than ripe for this," said the executive vice president of Pico Rivera-based L I Metal Systems, which installs metal roofing and other exterior home materials.

Lemmo is so convinced that ember-resistant vents are the wave of the future that his company is throwing money towards marketing itself as the "ember-resistant solution company," using Brandguard Vents as the spearhead.

"He's really got a tiger by the tail," Lemmo said. "The need is there."

Berkompas knows it, and he's pressing forward.

"We're in this 110 percent," he said. "You've got to believe in it. If you don't, it's going to flop."

matthew.wrye@inlandnewspapers.com
(909) 386-3871