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Tuesday, January 8, 2008

Local spotlight

Infomercial, new studios help Yoga Shelter growth

Chain will add Los Angeles and Grosse Pointe locations, a national ad in its quest for \$1.3M in revenue this year.

Maureen McDonald / Special to The Detroit News

WEST BLOOMFIELD -- Tranquility sells. More than 11,000 people a month visit three Yoga Shelter studios in Oakland County to tone the body, quiet the mind and kindle the prosperity of its owners and investors.

By summer co-owner Eric Paskel is opening a new studio in Los Angeles while Yoga Shelter's first franchise studio opens this spring in Grosse Pointe above a new Trader Joe's gourmet grocery. Paskel, a former actor and yoga teacher, introduced a \$59.99 DVD of his X-Flowsion technique and airs an infomercial on national television in January through his U-Karma label. The yoga chain expects to stretch its revenues to \$1.3 million in fiscal 2007.

Behind the raw silk curtains and antique temple doors of the West Bloomfield yoga studio, co-owner Steve Feldman, a former real estate entrepreneur, declares Yoga Shelter is a business plan to involve its members and potential investors in "sanga" or community.

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"The wellness and fitness segment of business is an emerging market," said Steve Feldman, co-owner of the West Bloomfield-based chain of studios. "People find that all the toys at our fingertips don't make us happier, our health system is failing. Yoga shelter offers more than a physical practice, it is a community that is comfortable, inviting."

To distinguish itself from competitors such as Detroit Yoga, Center for Yoga and Bikram Yoga Detroit, Practice Yoga and all the yoga classes at the YMCA, Feldman and Paskel hired a feng shui architect, Susan Haifleigh, owner of Environments & Energy Inc. in Northville. Her aim was to establish a contemporary studio with ancient artifacts in shades of gold and

russet. She frequented Berber Imports in Los Angeles for key pieces.

"It's a very attractive and comforting space," said Suzanne Rondeau, a freelance writer in Royal Oak. "I found the teacher very nurturing, encouraging."

Mike Whitty, professor of business at University of Detroit Mercy and a daily yoga practitioner, said the number of yoga classes, health food stores and alternative dance studios reflect a demand for healthy mood elevation. "Otherwise the stress and wear and tear on people makes them feel blue, tired and shaky. People will invest in a product or service that gives sustaining relief."

He cautioned that business owners such as Feldman and Paskel need more than exercise to stretch sales

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Patrons work out at the Yoga Shelter in West Bloomfield. "It's a very attractive and comforting space," says Suzanne Rondeau, a freelance writer in Royal Oak. (Gary Malerba / Special to The Detroit News)

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Extras

Yoga Shelter

Specialty: Eric Paskel and Steve Feldman run the West Bloomfield-based chain of yoga studios with the help of technology, feng shui architecture and a sense of community. Yoga shelter has 17 instructors and anticipated year-end revenues of \$1.3 million.

Contact: www.yogashelter.com

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numbers. "What it takes is competent owners and managers who can execute all the little details that make up a smooth operation and friendliness that encourages people to return again and again. Tranquility could become addictive."

Within an hour of attending her first yoga class, Rondeau had a personalized letter on her computer inviting her to partake of a week of free exercise classes and two months of unlimited stretching for \$99. "We stay in contact with guests in a way that is very personal," Feldman notes. The company offers workshops, chanting concerts and other events to foster participation.

"The biggest thing that helps us grow is that we make yoga fun and accessible," Feldman said. "Almost 80 percent of our business is referral. There is no hierarchy or competition. Everyone is invited to come and go at their own pace, explore ways to become completely present."

Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

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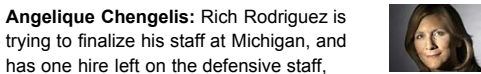
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