

Mechanic lands high-flying customers

FINDING A NICHE

MARK LARSON / STAFF WRITER

Victor Cushing doesn't spend a dime to advertise his 5-year-old business, Mather Aviation LLC, which does maintenance on private airplanes and jets.

He doesn't have to. Word of mouth brings him all the customers he needs.

After bringing his maintenance customers to Mather five years ago from Rancho Murieta Airport, he has tripled his revenue to about \$3.2 million.

Cushing now employs 42 at Mather, including 22 mechanics, with plenty of room to keep growing. At a second shop at Hayward Airport — where he started his career in 1978 as a mechanic for Cessna Aircraft — he employs 27 more. And he just started a private aircraft service center with two mechanics at Monterey Airport.

At Mather, he sees plenty of room to continue growing.

The world of private aircraft and corporate jets is tight-knit. What your ads say about your business isn't as important as what your customers say to each other. If you're reliable, you pick sales off the grapevine. "The job is done right, on time and as quoted," Cushing says.

It's also a business where top service is expected. "Planes are always washed and detailed when they leave," he says.

When pilots bring planes in for work, Cushing flies them back to their home base — even if he has to put them on a commercial plane and pick up the tab. And he'll fly them back when the aircraft is ready, usually five days later.

"We have customers," he says, "they fly to different airports, and pilots get to talking."

A growing local fleet: In 1991, Cushing moved to Rancho Murieta from Hayward to maintain three aircraft for the late Fred Anderson, owner of Pacific Coast Building Products. Some of Cushing's customers in Hayward followed him here.

He brought two mechanics with him and hired some more locally, from Patterson Aviation at Executive Airport. When he ran out of room at Rancho Murieta Airport, he partnered with John Clanton at Mather in 1996 to start Mather Aviation. Clanton's company, Trajen Inc., has the contract with Sacramento County to provide refueling service at Mather.

Since then, Cushing has built a big customer base at Mather. He maintains McClatchy Co.'s Hawker 800, Pacific Coast Building Products' Beechcraft KingAir 350, developer C.C. Myers' Hawker, the state Department of Justice's fleet of nine aircraft, the California Highway Patrol's



Victor Cushing keeps growing his Mather Aviation LLC, whose clients include C.C. Myers, the state Department of Justice and Foster Farms

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KingAir 200, Foster Farms' three aircraft, and Waste Connections' Hawker 600.

Cushing also supports the aircraft of companies that offer "fractional ownership" — sort of a corporate plane time-share set-up — such as Flex Jets, Net Jets, Executive Jets, Travel Air and Raytheon.

At one time he maintained Intel's corporate aircraft, but now Executive Jets of Cincinnati does that job at Mather.

At Mather, Cushing has various maintenance experts to cover a good chunk of the market. The shop is factory certified to repair Cessna, Pilatus and Mooney aircraft, and he's certified for Raytheon maintenance at his Hayward operation. He works on Beechcraft, Hawkers, BeechJets, Falcon Jets, Lear Jets and Citation Jets.

John Didier is a satisfied customer. He's chief of Sacramento Aviation Management Co. at Executive Airport, managing several corporate jets and turbo-props. Mather Aviation gets almost all of his maintenance work.

Didier first heard of Cushing 12 years ago. "We tried him out a little at a time, and we've been with him ever since."

Didier followed Cushing to Rancho Murieta and then to Mather.

"We've recommended quite a few people over the years who have turned out to be consistent customers," Didier says. "He's one of the best shops on the West Coast."

Three's company: People in the private aviation business in Greater Sacramento and across the country have seen strong growth both in corporate jets and ancillary services. Corporations increasingly prefer to fly executives to and from meetings in a private jet rather than risk delays and hassles with commercial airlines.

That has made hangar space for corporate aircraft expensive and all but unavailable, both in the Bay Area and here. And for a new corporate jet, most manufactur-

ers have a two-year wait.

Greater Sacramento has at least three airports now competing for the business. In addition to Mather, there's Executive Airport in Sacramento and now McClellan Business Park in North Highlands.

At Executive, Patterson Aviation — which has the airport's refueling contract with Sacramento County — wants to double its hangar space for small corporate jets to 14 from seven, says president John Gudebski. The company also wants to remodel office space for lease to corporate flight departments.

The big corporate jets, he adds, are "just a niche we can't fill here. It's a logical extension of the market for Mather."

At McClellan, Craig Randall, chief executive officer of Pacific Jets, touts the soon-to-be ex-Air Force base as better than Executive or Mather for corporate jets. He cites its long runway and distance from homes. But he just set up shop there in September and is only starting efforts to drum up corporate jet management deals.

Randall hopes Dassault Falcon Jet Corp. of New Jersey will set up a factory service center there by year's end that could employ up to 150, and give Mather Aviation a run for it.

Growth plans: For now, Mather Aviation has the deepest roster of private aircraft maintenance customers, and Cushing expects it to grow.

He'd like to get access to a large hangar at Mather for his maintenance operation. That would free up his current hangar space for an estimated 20 to 30 aircraft.

He scans the horizon, sees the private aircraft services growing at Executive and possibly a large competitor at McClellan, and he falls back on his basic business philosophy: happy customers talk.

"I'm the one," he says, "who the customers follow."

Bill to ease paperwork passes House

WASHINGTON BRIEFS

KENT HOOVER / WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

The House has unanimously approved a bill to reduce paperwork requirements for small businesses.

The legislation calls for the Office of Management and Budget to publish an



annual list of all the federal paperwork requirements that small businesses must follow, and directs each agency to establish a single point of contact for small businesses that have questions about the requirements. It also creates an

interagency task force to study ways to streamline the paperwork process.

The Small Business Administration estimates that regulatory burdens and the accompanying paperwork cost small businesses \$5,100 per employee.

The text of the Small Business Paperwork Relief Act (H.R. 327) is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov>

Patent office publishes applications:

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office published its first set of patent applications under a 1999 law that made significant changes in the patent system.

Nearly 50 patent applications in a variety of technical fields were published in the first week affected by the new law, which calls for patents to be published 18 months after the earliest effective patent date. Patents previously remained secret until they were granted.

The patent office expects the number of published patent applications will increase over the next 18 months to 3,500 a week.

Small business optimism rebounds:

Small business optimism rebounded in February after two months of declines, according to a monthly survey of small business owners by the NFIB Education Foundation.

Capital spending plans surged to the levels of a year ago, as 38 percent of the business owners said they plan to spend money to grow their businesses. But the number of companies that actually made capital outlays in the past six months declined.

"Small business owners report plans to spend on expansion, but tight profit margins have blocked those plans in the last few months and may continue to do so," says William Dunkelberg, chief economist of the NFIB Foundation, the research and education arm of the National Federation of Independent Business.