

# Newsday

THE LONG ISLAND NEWSPAPER

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## LI BUSINESS

A weekly report on the local economy

Entrepreneur:  
**MATMAKER**  
**MATMAKER**  
**MAKE ME A MAT**

Drew Kopf goes to the mats in the office of his Patchogue company.

THE  
**MAT**  
**KING**



Drew Kopf





# Getting In on the Ground Floor

## *Floor mat maven builds his business one step at a time*

By Carrie Mason-Draffen

STAFF WRITER

**W**HEN NEWLY MINTED entrepreneur Drew Kopf got his first order for a floor mat six years ago, it made him so nervous he had to take the rest of the day off. "My knees were knocking," Kopf said. "I was so shocked that anybody would buy anything from me."

The \$175 sale to a travel agency in 1988 was minuscule, but enough to launch the Mat King in East Patchogue, which had begun on a wing and with little cash to spare.

Today, the company's mats range from \$25 all the way up to \$10,000, depending on the size and how elaborate the customizing. Clients include Dowling College and some large corporations. Sales for the small company are projected to reach \$300,000 this year, enough to convince Kopf that there's good business in trying to help companies cope with the effects of heavy foot traffic.

"The chances for this to be a very big hit are great," said the animated and talkative entrepreneur. "Wherever people walk, there are mats. Wherever people stand, there needs to be mats. Mats become the solution to a lot of problems."

But the brutal recession that began gripping the Northeast in 1989 almost wrote the Mat King's epitaph. By the time the downturn ended four years later, many Long Island companies, big and small, were gone. The victims included the consumer electronics retailer Newmark & Lewis, a Mat King customer.

The Mat King managed to hang on, Kopf said, but not without major changes in the business.

In the early days, a substantial amount of business was generated by calling on metropolitan-area real estate management companies. When the recession depressed property values, the money spent for mats was cut. "If they were going to spend \$10,000, they were now going to be spending \$3,000," Kopf said.

So the tiny company had to look outside the area

to improve what had become a marginal existence. Kopf also attempted to carve out a niche by billing himself as a sort of super mat man for whom no design was too complex.

Kopf estimates that 70 percent of the company's orders now come from outside the New York area.

In a small office crammed with files, samples and computers, Kopf and his three employees make and field calls to customers and contract designers throughout the country. 3M is one of Kopf's biggest suppliers.

On a recent afternoon, an Oklahoma advertising executive called, looking for a mat for a counter that would include a photo display of an automotive client's products. The challenge, Kopf explained, would be to come up with something attractive and yet durable enough to protect the ad from the carburetors and other parts that mechanics would plunk down on it.

His most esoteric order came from a Detroit company whose heavy earth-moving machinery sometimes became stuck in swampy areas. Kopf and his designer came up with a mat of 1-foot-by-1-foot oak timbers that were locked together to provide a surface for the huge machines to sit on. As the machines move forward, their attachments reach back, pulling up the mats behind them and laying them across the terrain ahead.

The Mat King's basic mats are blue, gray or clear vinyl. Others are made with artificial turf for teeing-off on golf courses. Still others have elaborate logos with brilliant colors.

Mats weren't in Kopf's vision of his future when he graduated from Yeshiva University in Manhattan in 1968. He wanted to be a rabbi, then changed course to become a theater director. He obtained a master's degree from Philadelphia's Temple University in 1972 and then taught acting and staged plays at several YMHAs around the country.

Though he still loves the theater, he admits, "You knew you weren't going to get rich."

He sought advice from his father-in-law, who owned a retail carpet store. He said, "Sell mats

and call yourself the Mat King." Kopf did, and used a lion logo because it represents his astrological sign of Leo.

With \$250 and a rubber stamp to make business cards and stationery, Kopf set up shop. The first year he plowed backed into the company all the money he had earned, including his salary.

Kopf, 47, concedes that early on, he often didn't have a clue how to make some of the mats that companies requested. "I would look and measure," he said. "And I even had a camera with me and I'd take a photograph." But his academic background equipped him to do the research, which often included running off to the library.

A turning point for the company came in 1992. That was the year Kopf teamed with Joe Brown, an ad agency owner who is a Burl Ives lookalike. Together they decided the company needed to adver-

tise to pull in more business. So the Mat King scraped together \$7,000 and took out ads in the voluminous Thomas Register of American Manufacturers. That's how many clients nationwide found out about the Mat King.

Among the Mat

King's corporate clients is Enterprise Rent-a-Car. When Kopf visited its group headquarters in Hackensack, N.J., he didn't expect to make a sale. After all, he said, "Mats are not the important work of anybody's business." Replacing them "is only done once in a blue moon and then it's back to work."

But he had noticed that a mat in a Long Island Enterprise office failed to collect dirt, instead leaving it in a halo around the mat. Kopf pitched a mat that would do the job, and Enterprise operations manager Ellen Middleton became a customer.

Today, Kopf supplies the gray mats with the signature green square to many of Enterprise's more than 1,700 outlets nationwide.

"It's a good-looking mat and we are really pleased with it," Middleton said.

Not bad for a guy who sells something that nobody really thinks about until they need it.

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— Drew Kopf,  
The Mat King

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