

# BUSINESS

## Building business one quarter at a time

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John Gambacorto is celebrating 25 years as an independent business owner. His company: United Vending Services. His first account: the DeWitt Firehouse on West Genesee Street.

"They got a Ms. Pac Man and a Phoenix pinball machine," recalled Gambacorto like it was yesterday.

Since his first contract with the firefighters, Gambacorto now owns approximately 200 vending machines – and they're not limited to amusement games anymore.

"I do almost anything that takes a quarter," said Gambacorto, also known as "Big John" to his clients; he stands a mere six feet, eight inches tall.

Gambacorto's list of services includes ATM machines, massage chairs, snack, soda and gumball machines. His customers business's range from pizza shops to banks to bars and restaurants, such as Trapper's in DeWitt and Quaker Steak and Lube in Baldwinsville.

"I do business with people I like," Gambacorto said, when asked what he most enjoys about his job. "They're open-minded [and] they're proactive instead of reactive."

Games get rotated on a popularity basis – as the money starts to slow down, the amusement games change out. According to Big John, one of the newest and most popular machines on the market these days is "Guitar Heroes." The game gives players the chance to select their favorite song from some 50 hit titles, choose either lead or bass guitar and jam with their favorite band; a monitor even allows the player to "join" the band on stage.

"Because home computers can replicate games so well now, we have to be more interactive," Gambacorto said. "Prize games are very big right now, too" – and they're not just for children, he added.

Gambacorto remembers a time when he saw a busload of people who made a pit stop at a thruway station on their way to Canada. A child who was part of the bus group was playing a game, and all the adults circled around him, feeding the machine with dollar bills so they could watch him play some more.

"He was getting so close to winning," he said. "They were having such a good time."

Unlike most companies that are currently suffering fiscal loss because of the economy, Gambacorto said he's having a bit of an upswing – largely due to fresh layoffs.

"People have a lot of free time now but that's going to change," he said. "It's like having a month vacation – the first week you're doing everything you can, by the end of the month you're wishing you were back to work."

Gambacorto is a DeWitt native and active member on the DeWitt Town Planning Board. He still



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John Gambacorto watches as Trapper Pizza Pub employee Erin McLoughlin of Mattydale tries her luck at Jumpin Fantasy, an interactive jump rope game.

resides in DeWitt with his wife Mary and two children, Alyssa, 19, and Alexis, 8. His warehouse is located in the village of East Syracuse. He said he tries to keep his business within a 50 to 60 mile radius, "just so I'm able to service them in a way I want; too far away would be hard."

"He's phenomenal," said Andy Fish of Trapper's Pizza Pub in East Syracuse. "If there's ever any problem with a game, we call him and he's here that night."

Gambacorto smiled like a friend would react to a compliment. A large part of his success, he said, has to do with building rapport with his customers.

"I do business with people that I like," he said. "I've been lucky."