

# PV as a country business?

## — if you're a jack-of-all-trades

By Larry Elliott

Just rolled into the driveway after spending the better part of two days setting up an independent energy system for a client, only to get a call from Dave to hurry up and get this article finished. As I write, a knock on the shop door tells me a customer has delivered a generator that needs a new shaft welded and machined. The phone rings and, as I listen to a woman tell me she thinks there may be a problem with her solar system, I look down at a note left on the desk asking me if I would be willing to make some repairs on an electric car. The rest of the day was pretty slow and uneventful, but this scenario is pretty much repeated most days as I go about trying to earn enough money to stay financially solvent while living out in the country.

### Be a jack-of-all-trades

This article is titled "*PV as a country business?—if you're a jack-of-all-trades*" because, as you can see, I do everything from machine shop work to writing. I think most people who "succeed" out in the country pretty much fall into the same category as I do. You must be a "jack-of-all-trades." Not that you have to develop hundreds of different skills before moving to the country, but you must be willing to try most things and put your best effort forward in what you do try.

For anyone contemplating getting into an independent energy type business that can provide you and your family a living in the country, I will outline some of the things I have done to do just that.

The most obvious first step would be to do a little research in your chosen area to see if you have the resources to support a business. Find

out if your area has adequate sun, wind, or water resources. Is the population density great enough to support your business? What competition do you already face? Are you willing to cover a lot of territory to obtain enough business? Do rural electric lines already extend everywhere?

### Offer personal service

If after doing this research you determine that it looks favorable, ask yourself if you possess the skills that are necessary to do a good job. There are many good reputable catalog companies that can sell your potential customers just about anything except the most important ingredient, and that is personal service. It will be your ability to deliver good, on-site help on warranty repairs. And troubleshooting will be your ace in the hole.

Remember that you are not only getting into a new business for yourself, but the business itself is new. Everyday there are new products coming on line with changes in specifications and price. Codes and regulations change continuously and even customers' needs will change.

Are you willing to put up with "tire kickers"—the people who will use up a lot of your time just exploring the possibility of buying something from you? Will you be able to modify and improvise out in the field, sometimes miles from the nearest hardware or electrical store? Just like any business it can take several years to build up a clientele that can support you. Many independent energy dealers have been in business for years and still must rely on income from sources other than the energy business. Another very important point I need to make and that I feel is critical is to limit as much as possible your monthly need for income. Don't go into this with a

lot of debt. If there is one thing that has helped me to be successful, it is my lack of debt. When sales fall off, and they do, I can still get by. As a matter of fact in most parts of the country sales are somewhat seasonal, with summer months being the busiest times.

Most elements of good business practice are generic to any business, but being in the independent energy business requires at least one special element and that is patience with the customer and being willing to bend over backwards to make something work. Remember, if all of this is new to you, what do you think your customer feels like? Every effort is made by manufacturers to build in reliability and serviceability, but once in a while things happen that can be quite annoying to a customer. For most systems, you will end up babysitting them for at least a year free of charge. Fortunately, most equipment is reliable enough that you don't have to spend a lot of time, but occasionally it can be a pain in the butt.

I'm sure most people have said—at least to themselves—that they would like to start their own business and be their own boss. In some ways you are your own boss when working for yourself, but in reality having your own business can be a lot more headache and responsibility and work than punching a clock. Those who choose to move to the country do so to get away from that rat race and get off the treadmill. In spite of the headaches and hard work, your own business will allow you to live a better life. Δ