

SOLAR DIRECT

Bringing renewable technology down to earth

By **SUSAN ERWIN**
CORRESPONDENT

Dale Gulden and Kirk Maust understood how important clean energy was when it came to protecting the environment more than 30 years ago.

In 1985, they formed Solar Direct, a company in Sarasota that offers solar and renewable systems like solar water heating, wind power and other energy-saving products.

Gulden studied solar energy at Penn State and graduated in 1981.

He moved to Florida and met Maust at a home improvement products show where they began their business venture.

"Back then it was mostly solar pool heating and hot water heating," said Gulden, who serves as director of marketing for the company.

About 75 percent of the company's business is residential, but it has had some major commercial accounts like the Sarasota Hampton Inn, where it installed five industrial-duty solar thermal collectors.

"This solar thermal system was a critical component in Hampton Inn achieving its first nation-wide LEED® Green Building Certification," Gulden said.

Oliver Baumgart, sales manager at Solar Direct, said the company has seen a steady stream of new customers over the past year.

People are starting to learn more about energy savings and have become more interested in environmentally friendly products, he said.

"We offer everything that has to do with solar — water and pool heating, solar attic fans, as well as energy-saving and water conservation products," Baumgart said.

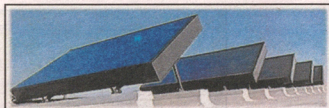
Solar Direct has licensed contractors available to complete the installations, and it also offers do-it-yourself kits on several items.

"Some people are really handy and they just need some tips to help get the job done," Baumgart said. "So they can purchase a kit with instructions and then call us if they need help installing it."

The company also offers stand-alone items for smaller home projects, like free-floating pool and pond products that circulate air within the water.

"We fully support everything we sell," said Maust, CEO and senior engineer for Solar Direct. "There are generally few questions or concerns that show up during installation."

There are many incentives homeowners can still get when upgrading to clean energy products. Details can be found at energy.gov.



PROVIDED PHOTO

Sarasota Hampton Inn partnered with Solar Direct in the installation of five industrial-duty solar thermal collectors. This solar thermal system was a critical component in Hampton Inn achieving its first nation-wide LEED® Green Building Certification.



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The site selected for the project is located on the premises of the Sarasota/Bradenton Airport. The urban site at the entrance to the airport minimized the environmental impact by not requiring additional removal of plant life nor disturbing wetlands or local bodies of water.



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"Think about the return you are getting on your investment," Maust said. "Would you rather stick money in a bank and earn a few percent back or put it into an energy product where you will eventually get all your money back, plus monthly savings on your electric bill."

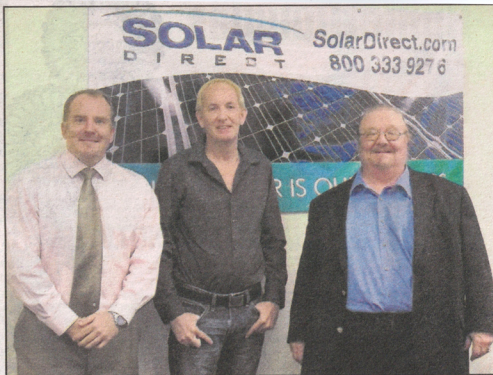
Solar lighting and wind power systems are becoming more popular because they're self-contained and cost effective.

"It's an exciting time right now for us because we are really growing — last year we had two salespeople and now we have 13," Baumgart said.

The company serves and ships throughout Florida.

Next for the company is developing more franchise offices around the nation.

For more information, visit www.solarirect.com, or call 941-359-8228.



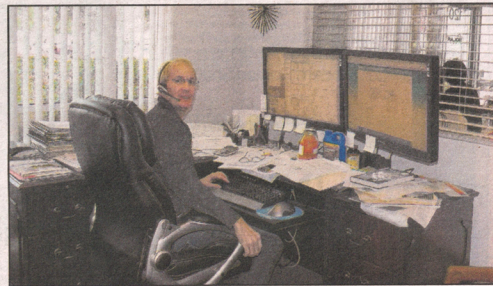
SUN PHOTO BY SUSAN ERWIN

Solar Direct Sales Manager Oliver Baumgart, left, Owner and Director of Marketing Dale Gulden and CEO/Senior Engineer Kirk Maust.



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Solar Direct Sales Manager Oliver Baumgart stands near some of the items housed in the company warehouse.



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Solar Direct co-owner and Director of Marketing Dale Gulden works in his office in Sarasota.