

SECURITY COMPANY TOP OF THE LINE:[Final Edition]

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Full Text (619 words)

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It was last October when thousands of people were to converge on the Virginia Air & Space Center in Hampton for a "contestant search" for the Wheel of Fortune television game show.

But four days before the event, the person organizing the event, Elizabeth Fimian for Channel 13, found out she didn't have enough security: The Hampton Police Department wasn't able to provide as many police officers as she once thought.

That's when she called Top Guard Security Inc. of Hampton.

The firm -- one of the biggest security companies on the Peninsula, with 200 guards deployed a day -- readily agreed to staff the event with nine guards. And aside from providing a security presence, they did other little things.

They helped bring people inside and organize lines when a severe rainstorm hit. They helped pass out key chains to the contestant wannabes. One even made a run to Burger King to buy lunch for the event's staff.

"Every officer pitched in and made himself or herself flexible," Fimian said.

That kind of adaptability, and accommodating their service to what businesses need, is key to the success of Top Guard Security's business, operations director Chris Stuart said.

Some of the firm's clients -- such as the federal agencies and some of the manufacturing and construction companies the firm counts among its clients -- want their guards to create an off-putting presence and a bit of fear, and to do things like report workers who forget their ID badges.

But other clients -- such as those organizing the Wheel of Fortune event and those at many office buildings -- want their security guards to be a more friendly presence.

"Some companies want a complete following of rules and regulations, and some clients want customer service through and through," Stuart said. "It all depends."

Top Guard, which has been in business on Kings Way in Hampton since 1974, employs about 200 people a day, up from about 175 a year ago. Stuart said that's due, in part, to an overall increase in security concerns since Sept. 11.

The firm has done an average of \$2.4 million a year in annual sales over the past five years.

Some of the firm's clients are government agencies: the City of Hampton, the federal government's Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility, the Army, the Virginia Department of Transportation.

The firm also has supplied officers to private companies, including Langley Federal Credit Union, Anheuser-Busch, the Williamsburg Outlet Mall, Net Center in Newport News and the AMC Theater in Hampton.

Krispy Kreme hires Top Guard for one day each year: Christmas Day, the one day of the year it closes.

Top Guard won't take all work, however. They won't work private parties, convenience stores, restaurants or any location that serves alcohol. Convenience stores are seen by many guards as too dangerous, and alcohol can make an otherwise calm person difficult to deal with.

"We've found that long term, to retain good officers, we don't want high-problem clients."

ABOUT TOP GUARD SECURITY

NAME: Top Guard Security Inc.

LOCATION: 112 Kings Way, downtown Hampton

FOUNDED: 1974

KEY PEOPLE: Nicole M. Stuart, president; Brenda S. Maust, vice president; Chris Stuart, operations manager; Ron Sullins, assistant operations manager

EMPLOYEES: 200 guards

PRODUCT/SERVICE: Provides security for construction sites, office buildings, manufacturing sites and other businesses

TOP COMPETITORS: Pinkerton Security, The Wackenhut Corp., Citywide Protection Services Inc.

WEB SITE: topguardinc.com

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[Illustration]

Staff photo (b&w) by SANG-JIB MIN; Caption: Sgt. Beverly Smith of Top Guard Security patrols Net Center last month in Newport News. The company is one of the biggest security firms on the Peninsula, with 200 guards deployed a day.

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