

It's full steam ahead for model trains

■ The model train industry is alive and well in the United States with an estimated half a million people spending \$500 million annually.

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Rich people may like to collect fine art, haute couture, fancy cars and luxury yachts, but Michael Hart knows what they really want: trains.

Hart's clients don't ride the rails like Henry Flagler did; they mount scale-model railroad cars on tiny tracks and watch them run through a maze of miniature hills, valleys, tunnels, bridges, depots, even entire cities. Trains can cost hundreds, even thousands, of dollars, and high-end layouts can easily top a million dollars.

Hart founded Scale Models, Arts, and Technologies in 1995 to cater to this niche market. In 10 years, he has added 14 full-time employees and moved into a 7,000-square-foot facility in North Miami Beach. The company rang up \$1.5 million in sales last year, he said.

"We are by far No. 1 in the country," Hart said. "I'm able to give a lot of comfort, insurance and security. When someone spends that kind of money, they want a professional."

Clients seek him out, Hart added, because of the level of quality and professionalism he provides.

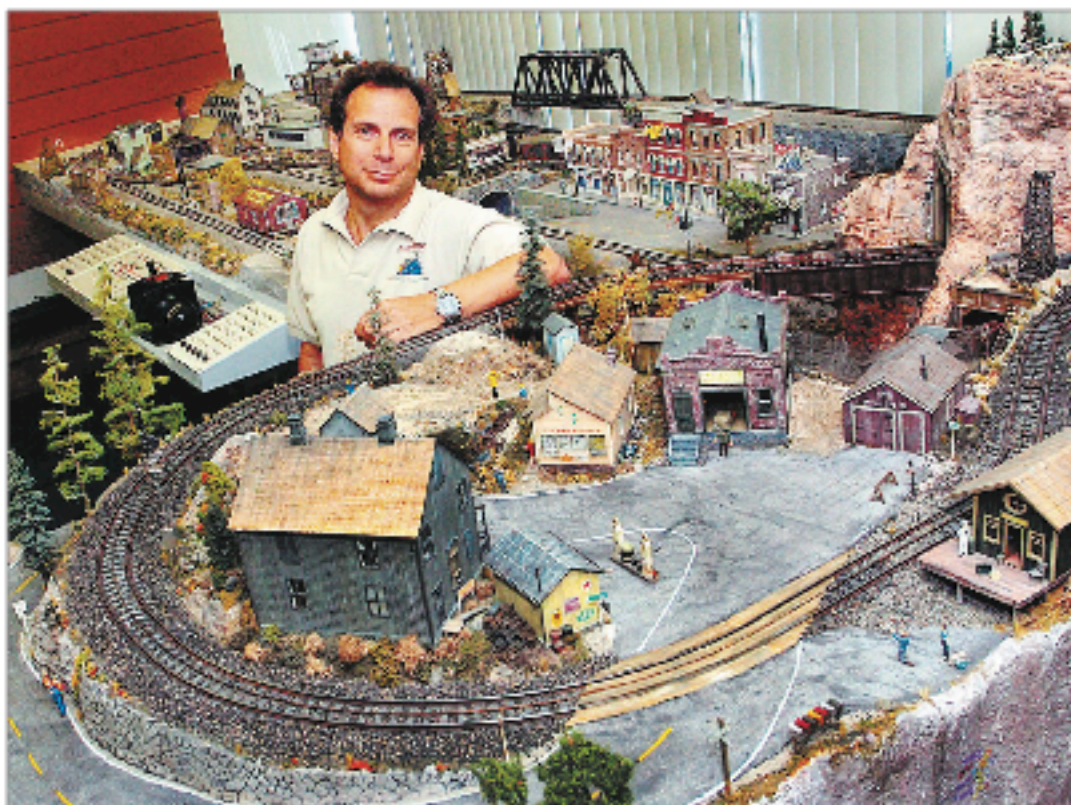
LUXURIOUS LAYOUTS

John Luppino, operations manager for the national Train Collectors Association, said there are a growing number of companies that build model train layouts to serve the sophisticated model railroader.

"The trend today is more toward having a layout and having it operate more like a real railroad," said Luppino, whose organization boasts 32,000 members worldwide.

Since it can take months to build a working train layout, some collectors want to spend less time building the layouts and more time operating them, he said.

"That's one of the reasons why companies like SMARTT are enjoying success," Luppino said. "Despite all the doom and gloom you hear about the economy, there are



PHOTOS BY DONNA E. NATALE PLANAS/HERALD STAFF

RIDING THE RAILS: Michael Hart, president of SMARTT, shows off his first professional train layout.



ATTENTION TO DETAIL: Sigfrido Muceniks wires a control board for a train layout.

people that have substantial income to spend on that."

Dick Christianson, managing editor of hobbyist magazine *Model Railroader*, estimates that half a million adults buy scale-model trains and build layouts, spending \$500 million year on their pastime.

"The hobby is very healthy," he said. "If you look in our magazine, you'll see page after page of new products."



THE BIG PICTURE: Art director Alex Vasserman, top, decorates scenery, as David Balton, bottom, works on electronics for an elaborate train layout at SMARTT.

Hart, who studied engineering in college, began his career crafting architectural models but switched to train layouts when he saw how much the hobby had grown.



FULL STEAM AHEAD

If you're interested in collecting scale-model trains, check out these resources:

FOR BEGINNERS

● The Train Collectors Association

The next meeting for the Southern Division, which includes Florida, is May 21 in Maitland.

www.traincollectors.org

● Trains.com

An online community of train collectors and model railroaders.

www.trains.com

FOR EXPERTS

● Ready to Roll

831 N.W. 143rd St.
Biscayne Gardens

305-688-8868

www.readytorolltrains.com

● SMARTT

305-949-1706

www.smarttinc.com

"Our clients always opt for the high-end layout. They always want more when they see what they're getting."

— TOM KAPATELIS,
SMARTT's general manager

"I grew up being a train nut," he said. "I'm an artist, but I also have a strong business background."

That combination of enthusiasm and acumen has made SMARTT highly sought after among train hobbyists, said Tom Kapatelis, SMARTT's general manager.

"Our clients always opt for the high-end layout," he said. "They always want more when they see what they're getting."

BIGGEST PROJECT

The company's biggest project to date was for a private client in Michigan that took nearly two years to complete.

• TURN TO MODELS, 13

Model train industry keeps on the right track

*MODELS, FROM 12

It has over a half-mile of tracks and can run a dozen trains at once, Hart said. The cost: \$1.5 million.

"He was one of the most demanding clients that we've ever had," Hart said. "He sent me a letter, close to 20 pages, with all the things that he wanted."

But in the end, the client was pleased. Hart has a team in Michigan now, installing the finishing touches.

COMMERCIAL PROJECTS

SMARTT was founded primarily to meet the demands of private customers, but Hart said the firm has begun to gradually branch out into commercial projects to generate more revenue, including last year's holiday train layout at the Aventura Mall.

The company has collaborated on other projects, including the Christmas train layout at Macy's Santaland in New York, a 3,300-square-foot layout at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento and a \$3 million project that revamped a renowned railroad exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

In addition to building custom railroad layouts, SMARTT

HOW DO THEY DO THAT?

According to SMARTT's chief model maker, Raymond Potter, several steps are involved in the construction of a scale-model train layout. Some parts of the process can overlap.

- **The process starts with** conversations with a client to come up with a conceptual design, which is fleshed out using CAD software, storyboards and renderings.
- **Mechanical and electrical** work is plotted, and infrastructure and clearance issues are addressed.
- **The benchwork**, a table-top frame, is built to support the layout.
- **Electrical wiring** is installed and the tracks are laid, usually concurrently.
- **Landscapes are molded** out of various compounds, including plaster casting, urethane molding and screens filled with foam.
- **Scenery and vignettes** — trees, buildings, people and slice-of-life scenes — are added.
- **Finishing touches** are supplied for those who want super detailing. They might include weathering, rust on the tracks, oranges rolling down a hill or a pigeon on a roof.
- **Special effects** are added, such as animation, sound, smoke and lighting.

provides scale models and props for architects, developers, engineers, industrial designers and film producers. But Hart said that the train layouts make up 85 percent of his business, and he attributes part of his firm's success in the rail-

road layout business to the proximity to one of the largest model railroad supply stores in the country, Ready to Roll in Biscayne Gardens.

The store is owned by Hart's friend and frequent collaborator, Bill Lucas.



NEW COAT OF PAINT: Model maker Ray Del Papa sprays the first layer of a building mock-up in the paint booth of SMARTT's facilities.

"We basically supply a large quantity of products he uses in his layouts," said Lucas. "We have tens of thousands of items it takes to build a model railroad."

FULLY STOCKED STORE

Ready to Roll has a 3,500-square-foot showroom stocked with diesel and steam engines, freight and passenger cars and such accessories as hotels, breweries, motorcycle dealer-

ships, candy shops, filling stations, diners, water towers, rail workers and passengers.

Lucas said he has customers from all over the world, including collectors in Germany, England, South Africa and even Antarctica. But he appreciates his business partnerships back home, often referring customers to SMARTT.

"And they refer customers to us," he added. "It's a mutual admiration thing."

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