

Start Up Launches Innovative Product to Protect And Beautify Residential Solar Investment



Bob Smith – President
SolaTrim LLC

“The promise of Residential Solar is threefold: Productivity, Longevity and Safety. There was a gap in the packaged solar products and services offered to the homeowner that created a threat to that promise. We believe with SolaTrim we have filled that gap and eliminated that threat in a cost-effective and aesthetic way.”
- Bob Smith

SolaTrim LLC
For more information visit:
www.solatrim.com

Contact:
Bob Smith
916-292-8699
bsmith@solatrim.com

CEOCFO: Mr. Smith, what is the concept behind SolaTrim?

Mr. Smith: We believe that the current construction model for residential solar is incomplete in that the rooftop system can be seen as an eyesore and also that the area underneath the solar panels is vulnerable to environmental impact. The SolaTrim barrier is designed to completely mitigate the problem whether it is aesthetics, climate, extreme weather, biological impact or pest control. SolaTrim is a solution to perhaps one of the unintended consequences of the rapid growth in residential solar, in that rooftop solar is susceptible to environmental damage. Solar arrays also attract pests; specifically pigeons and squirrels who like to nest under solar arrays. When they do so they degrade and often damage the rooftop area and the solar equipment. SolaTrim is an aesthetic and permanent solution to these and other environmental issues, and we think it is the must-have finishing touch to rooftop solar systems.

CEOCFO: Are most purchasers of solar systems aware of the potential problem?

Mr. Smith: For the end users, there is not really a general awareness of this issue. It usually presents itself after the system is in place. Sometimes proactive solar companies will engage the customer in conversation about long-term protection and pest abatement. However, one of our goals is to spread awareness of this problem and to educate both the public and the industry about how important this aspect is.

CEOCFO: *Does it matter about the weather or the geography or is the problem universal?*

Mr. Smith: There are some hot spots, so to speak, where environmental impact becomes more critical, but we believe every rooftop system should be protected. We see many problems in the North East: New Jersey, Long Island, Pennsylvania and New England. We move a lot of product in Massachusetts where you have high density trees, cold winter weather, and millions of squirrels. As any contractor there will tell you, Solar is experiencing a lot of squirrel issues along the Northeast corridor in the U.S.

In California and Arizona, there are a lot of pigeon problems; Colorado is also subject to this. We recently found out that Hawaii has to deal with its own variety of invasive pests as well.

CEOCFO: *When did you become aware of the problem and how did you come up with the solution?*

Mr. Smith: I was managing construction operations for a solar firm in Northern California and the issue would come up occasionally. The sub-contractors we used to treat this problem would just improvise a solution with some sort of wire screening and tie downs and there was never really a prescribed manner in which to address critter guards. Also, as I saw the invoices come across my desk, it was expensive to request this post-installation. So, I became aware that there needed to be a more cost effective and aesthetic solution for this issue.

Around that time an associate of mine who I had done business with before, was in gutter protection products and he called me with the concept of using adhesives to attach to the solar modules themselves to provide that protective barrier. We met to discuss the idea, refined some designs and subsequently looked at manufacturing such a product. After much research and development we found a way to do it that would reduce installation costs and provide an aesthetic skirting at the same time. So, we moved forward with that.

CEOCFO: *What is available from SolaTrim today?*

Mr. Smith: SolaTrim is currently the manufacturer of our patented SolaTrim barrier. However, at this time we are also developing, as the industry matures and solar modules evolve technologically, variations of this theme that will allow the new frameless modules to also have this kind of protection. We believe that current wire cage products with friction clips and other metal fasteners will not be able to be used as solar modules become more streamlined. However, we are hoping to stay on top of panel evolution by developing variations of our patented SolaTrim theme.

CEOCFO: *Are you marketing to solar panel installers? Is there an aftermarket product? Both?*

Mr. Smith: We actually have two targets in mind. One is the Solar Industry itself. Our value proposition is for the Industry to protect their investment in rooftop solar inexpensively. There is not enough margin in the business for a lot warranty and maintenance to be taking place after installation.

With the majority of rooftop systems being leased that means that the solar finance company is holding paper on the leased system for twenty or more years. How do they want to protect that investment? Would they like to eliminate the incidence of environmental damage completely? If they do that, then they are only paying for component failure which, on a larger scale, can be projected and budgeted for more precisely.

So when a big solar integrator looks at large scale fleet management with thousands of rooftop systems to maintain; how much do they want to spend on unnecessary Operations and Maintenance? Installing SolaTrim is an inexpensive insurance policy and it is suitable for both solar kit sales or as a retrofit aftermarket accessory.

Then on the other hand, we market to both the installer and end user by pointing out that a solar system without skirting looks unfinished and vulnerable. Why not put an attractive aesthetic and practical barrier around that system, in order to protect your investment while making your solar look more attractive? By this approach, we are speaking to those two market segments and they both seem to be responding.

CEOCFO: *How do you get everyone to pay attention?*

Mr. Smith: Initially, we were just doing grass roots marketing. I have always felt that the solar industry tell certainly us whether SolaTrim is a viable solution for them or not, so we did some projects for solar installers and consumers. The response was very positive. Once we reached the stage where we needed to attract more industry attention, we hired a manufacturer's rep, contracted an ad agency to help us increase that awareness, and worked the industry trade shows. This September, we launched our new website, www.solatrim.com and we just exhibited at Solar Power International this year. We are issuing press releases, writing blogs and doing our networking so there will be greater awareness of SolaTrim in the industry. At this point, I have to say that those efforts have been effective in that we are currently in negotiations with manufacturers, distributors and solar integrators who are interested in using our product. And, as a result of our presence at SPI, we have sold a lot more product and landed more distribution and licensing deals.

CEOCFO: *Would you be continuing to manufacture? Might you license the technology?*

Mr. Smith: Right now we're not thinking long term. Much of our focus at this moment is on spreading awareness, forming relationships and manufacturing SolaTrim. Our goal is to move product domestically and look into foreign markets before the end of this year. We are currently negotiating a distribution deal in Canada and talking to Puerto Rican solar companies. As far as growth is concerned, we are allowing for an organic process. SPI taught us essentially what the industry's plans for us are when we saw who stepped forward and what they told us and we are planning along those lines. But right now our day-to-day task is to manufacture product, create distribution deals, spread awareness and try not to get ahead of ourselves.

CEOCFO: *What surprised you so far?*

Mr. Smith: One, that we were correct in assessing that the current methods and products for rooftop system protection, while perhaps effective, were not very aesthetic, simple to install, or particularly adaptive and, that the Industry would embrace what we believed to be a better option. What also surprised me was that while I thought I knew something about the solar industry, the more I realize there has been a fundamental sea change in the way the world invests in energy and that the players who are moving to support, fund and participate in renewables come from manufacturing, finance and petroleum firms from all over the world. At SPI, I met prospective customers from every continent. We are happy to be a part of this tremendous movement.

CEOCFO: *Are you funded for the next steps? Are you seeking partners or investment?*

Mr. Smith: Yes, we have the necessary funding. We issued a press release about a month ago where we welcomed an investor named Mark Roe, who was formerly SolarCity's Vice President of Operations. Mark was attracted to our concept, our intellectual property, and our vision. As a result, he stepped up and provided our second stage funding. As a partner we look to Mark to help guide us as we look to secure domestic and global licensing and distribution. He is an extraordinary asset to SolaTrim and we are extremely happy to have him on board.

CEOCFO: *How is the trim constructed?*

Mr. Smith: SolaTrim is made out of lightweight aluminum. It is poly-coated black and will not discolor or rust. It is backed by a state of the art peel-and-stick adhesive that will withstand any climate conditions and provide a permanent adhesion to the module frame. We believe that this is the hook for SolaTrim's success, because we no longer have to rely on single point fastening, like rivets, clips or screws. Our adhesive will provide a continuous weld to the side or the top of the solar module itself and once installed, does not have to be maintained or replaced.

CEOCFO: *People often use search as a tool to find a solution or a new idea. Is there a category for the problem as it stands today that people might Google to find you?*

Mr. Smith: We are focused on that exact issue. Our ad agency is helping us with what we call long-string keywords. People will type anything from, "pigeons under my solar," to "residential solar pest abatement". There is probably a list of fifty to sixty phrases that people have historically typed in to find out about this problem. We have done research about what phrases those are to make sure that our internet materials contain those long form keywords so they can find us. Again, while our initial marketing was grass roots - I was doing it myself based on my limited knowledge of SEO dynamics. That particular skill has since passed me by and now I have hired professionals to help us do that. So, if you were to type in, "Rooftop Solar Pests," you will find us.

CEOCFO: *Why is SolaTrim an outstanding company? Why should people pay attention?*

Mr. Smith: The promise of Residential Solar is threefold: Productivity, Longevity and Safety. There was a gap in the packaged solar products and services offered to the homeowner that created a threat to that promise. We believe with SolaTrim we have filled that gap and eliminated that threat in a cost-effective and aesthetic way.

Residential Solar inadvertently left out what we felt were two important components: One is the aesthetic nature of the array. People care what their homes look like and one of the reasons that prevent homeowners from putting solar on their roof is that they think it is unattractive. SolaTrim definitely improves the aesthetic look of rooftop solar. Secondly, it is a long term investment and without our SolaTrim barrier, it remains vulnerable.

These days, neither homeowners nor financial servicers like vulnerabilities in their investments so we are eliminating that for them at a price point they are comfortable with. We think we have checked the two important boxes that will enable us to grow as a company. We are not revolutionizing anything. We are just creating an aftermarket product that makes it possible for a very important category of the renewable energy industry to be more efficient, more effective and better protected

from environmental elements that can damage the system and handicap the return on investment.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

