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## **Bonded Lightning striking it big on Treasure Coast**

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How do you strike it big in the nation's lightning capital? Design and install lightning and surge protection systems.

Bonded Lightning of Florida's sales have increased each year since its founding in 1973, with never a downward turn, according to founder and owner Dennis Dillon. Over the past four years, sales have increased 20 percent each year.

"This will be our best year ever," Dillon said.

The company serves businesses and consumers from Vero Beach to the Keys, with other customers in the Caribbean and a recent expansion to the Naples-Fort Myers area.

Dillon attributes his company's growth to dynamic growth of the Treasure Coast and South Florida, plus the reputation Bonded Lightning has built through providing a good job at a fair price. He points to dealings with the same people in the building trades for many years.

"I tell all my employees to put a smile on the customer's face," Dillon says. "Word-of-mouth referral is the best advertising."

Because it's a peninsula with water on three sides, Florida provides the evaporating water to make it the thunderstorm leader of the nation.

Lightning is the number one weather-related killer in Florida, accounting for more deaths than all other weather sources combined, according to the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration. Since 1959, lightning has killed 89 people in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties, the largest number of lightning deaths of any three contiguous counties in the United States. On average, two die and nine are injured by lightning each year in South Florida.

NOAA also reports damage losses from lightning in the United States total more than \$5 billion each year. With up to a million volts of power, lightning bolts rip through roofs, start fires and wipe out electrical and plumbing systems.

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Dillon says computers are more sensitive to lightning than previous devices and appliances.

Since computers now run virtually everything, one lightning strike can take down a company's operations.

Bonded Lightning installs lightning rods on the roofs of commercial and residential buildings, about one every 20 feet following National Fire Protection codes that direct what must be done to prevent fires.

When lightning strikes, it is simply trying to find the most direct route to the ground. Bonded Lightning's systems route the bolt to the ground so that it doesn't seek out the building's electrical or plumbing system.

Dillon debunks the common myth that lightning rods attract lightning. He says scientists still don't know why lightning strikes in one spot and not another.

Bonded Lightning buys the equipment from an Ohio manufacturer.

"We're their exclusive dealer in South Florida and their largest customer," Dillon says. "As a result, they give us a good price, which allows us to also provide a good price to our customers."

Dillon says commercial buildings make up about 95 percent of his customers. His residential segment is made up mostly of high-end homes. A normal commercial job requires one to two weeks, while a residence can usually be done in a day.

Business picks up in the summer when daily thunder showers increase in frequency. Dillon reports that when one house in a development gets struck by lightning, he tends to get a flurry of calls from anxious neighbors.

Hurricanes cause business to boom. "When the roof blows off, the lightning rods go with it, requiring reinstallation," Dillon says. "We're just getting caught up from 2004."

Bonded Lightning is the second-largest lightning protection company in the country, trailing only Bonded Lightning of Texas, which was started by family cousins but is now owned by others and is unrelated to the local firm.

The original Bonded Lightning was founded by the great grandfather of Dillon's wife, Diane, in 1892 in Washington D.C. Dillon earned a business management degree from the University of Maryland and worked for his wife's family business for a year as an installer.

"You have to learn by doing," he says.

In 1973, Dennis and Diane Dillon decided to move to Florida and strike out on their own.

He installed in the field by day and managed the office chores in the evening. Pregnant with her first child, Diane answered the phones.

They worked from their two-bedroom home in Riviera Beach, using the garage as a warehouse. A \$3,000 bank loan helped out.

"It was hand-to-mouth, but we were convinced it was a good business," Dillon said.

Dillon took advantage of the 1970s construction boom for high rise, oceanfront condominium buildings up and down the coast. He showed electrical contractors, the only workers doing lightning protection work, that he could do it cheaper because of his experience and the fact that it was his specialty. Most were happy to subcontract the work. Dillon also convinced designers, architects and engineers to get lightning protection into the original specifications.

By 1978, with their family growing, the Dillons built a new house on five acres in Jupiter Farms, then expanded it, and built a large barn-like structure out back for their equipment. Bonded

Lightning operated from that location until 2001 when, with the employees and trucks having grown too big for a residential neighborhood, Dillon built the present 10,000-square-foot building in Jupiter, just south of Indiantown Road.

The company's work load really took off during the 1990s when the boom in population combined with new state and county codes, which required lightning protection in all schools and hospitals. More people also meant more public buildings, like post offices, police stations, fire stations, city halls and wastewater treatment plants, all needing Bonded Lightning's services.

"We're doing 40 to 50 fire stations right now," Dillon says. "School and hospitals are constantly doing additions, and we've been working continuously for years at Miami International Airport, where they always seem to be tearing down old buildings and putting up new."

Dillon says his biggest problem is lack of manpower. The company currently employs 50, but could expand to 100 over the next few years. Dillon prefers high school graduates but can take non-grads as well.

New employees learn on the job by going out with veteran workers.

"I have to take care of my employees because I don't want them to leave after I've spent money training them," he said. "Lots of my employees have worked here for many years."

Dillon is moving toward the day when his six children will take over the company. All work for Bonded Lightning, with the eldest son, Pat, taking over his dad's duties of running day-to-day operations.

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