

Entrepreneur uses real estate savvy to be a HERO

By Allison Shirreffs
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

With a mix of real-estate savvy, controlled growth and an ability to satisfy his clients' needs, Chris Kouloukas thinks he has found a way to take advantage of the growing number of employees who work from home.

He plans to franchise his way across the Southeast with **SOHO HERO**, a retail outlet founded in 2005 where telecommuters can connect with fellow entrepreneurs, access an art department, a mailroom, Wi-Fi, workstations and a conference room.

It is called SOHO HERO because it is marketed to those who work in small office/home offices or "SOHOs," as they've been dubbed.

Easy access

Company: SOHO HERO

Founder: Chris Kouloukas

Year Founded: 2005

Number of Franchises: 28 open; six committed

States located: Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina

There are currently 28 SOHO HERO locations in Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina, and six more in the works.

All can be found in anchored shopping centers in suburban areas with homes in the \$200,000 to \$600,000 range. There are seven SOHO HEROs in suburban Atlanta.

Kouloukas, 37, vows to provide those who work from home with access to the same services available to employees at bigger companies, as well as services unique to SOHOs.

"It's kind of like you put a Starbucks in a FedEx [office]," said Michael Gordon, owner of **Gatehouse Home Furnishings Inc.**, a company that imports furniture and accessories from China.

Gordon uses a SOHO HERO to do all his international shipping, but it's about more than SOHO HERO's ability to stay on top of shipments that keeps him coming back.

"They're very accommodating and upbeat," Gordon said. "They make you feel like you're at home."

Even though Kouloukas has high ambitions for his business — he'd like

SOHO HERO to become an American icon — he has no intention of putting one on every corner. "Controlled growth is important," he said.

Kouloukas is leveraging another trend: baby boomers.

According to FORTUNE magazine, the number of self-employed Americans aged 55 and older was 2.5 million in 1994. In less than 10 years, that number jumped to 3 million.

"Somehow it's acceptable to go work at a Home Depot and wear an orange apron when you have a million dollars worth of training from a company like Coca-Cola," said Kouloukas, who is courting baby boomers to be his franchisees. "We don't have to teach them to be a business person. They already have those skills."