

Amazon veteran launches home-improvement site

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It's not quite a cluster, but Seattle now has several tech companies targeting the home-improvement space.

The screenshot shows the Pro.com website interface. At the top left is the Pro.com logo. At the top right is the phone number 1-800-597-4776, a link to 'Ask a question', and a 'Sign in' button. The main heading is 'Get a price. Get a pro. Get it done.' Below this is a form titled 'What's on your home to-do list?' with a list of tasks: 1. paint living room, 2. get the junk out of my garage, 3. fix hole in playroom wall, 4. install closet organizer, and 5. An orange 'INSTANT ESTIMATE' button is below the list. To the right is a blue map of the United States with a location pin. Below the map is a table titled '- B&C's Guest House in 48108 -' showing a 'TOTAL PRESTIMATE' of \$269 - \$312.

- B&C's Guest House in 48108 -	
Install Washing Machine	\$64 - \$68
Replace Lightbulbs	\$30 - \$60
Replace Toilet	\$175 - \$184
TOTAL PRESTIMATE	\$269 - \$312

The latest entrant – Pro.com – is emerging today with top-shelf investors and a particularly ambitious business plan.

Pro.com aims to simplify the process of pricing home-improvement projects, finding a contractor and scheduling an appointment to get the project started. The goal is to get this all done with a just a few clicks, making the process easier and more transparent for customers.

Homeowners click on the projects they need done, enter their zip code and a few details and are presented with a menu of typical labor costs - dubbed "Prestimates" - for each project. They also receive a list of vetted service providers, with moderated ratings, and available dates and times when the work can be scheduled. Contractors can list their services for free but pay a commission on completed jobs provided through Pro.com.

For the last five months the company has been operating in stealthy test mode as SeattleHomePro.com. Today it's launching nationally – though still in beta mode – as Pro.com. In regions where it doesn't yet have contractor listings, the company offers to gather a list of possible service-providers, a service that's done by employees in Seattle. So far the scheduling feature – which it calls "direct booking" – is only available in a small group of cities, including Seattle.

The company's customer-centric approach is heavily influenced by Amazon.com, where Pro.com Chief Executive Matt Williams worked for 12 years and first began exploring ways to simplify the purchase of local services.

The screenshot shows the Pro.com interface. At the top, it says 'PRO' and '1-800-997-4776 Ask a question Sign in'. Below that, it says 'Scheduling a pro for: Paint a Room'. A list of services and their prices is shown: Repair Drywall or Sheetrock (\$100 - \$100), Remove Trash, Sinks, or Cabinets (\$200 - \$500), Install Closet Organization System (\$100 - \$100), Screen Doors (\$50 - \$100), and Total Paintwork (\$100 - \$100). The main recommendation is for Dave Croxpton, a General Contractor, with a 95% rating and a 'SCHEDULE NOW' button. To the right, it says 'Based on your requests, we recommend this Pro-' and lists statistics: Completed 231 hourly jobs/month, 5+ jobs/month are complete, 211 / 218 customers are very satisfied, and 21 years of General Contractor experience. Below this, it says 'Most recent, outstanding reviews of quality' with a 5-star rating. At the bottom, it says 'Have availability 10/11 - 10/11' and 'SCHEDULE NOW'. Below the main recommendation, there is a section for 'Other matches' with four other contractors: Dave Reed (99%), Bill Beale (86%), Dyma Kelly (85%), and Jason Aggar (85%). Each has a 'SCHEDULE NOW' button.

Williams said the platform for pricing, selecting and scheduling services may be extended in the future.

“The vision of this company is to price and book reliable local services in under a minute and that goes beyond home improvement,” he said. “Long term we want to build this out across many categories.”

In the meantime Pro.com will face off against a new wave of companies trying to digify home-improvement, a huge but unwieldy market that’s been repeatedly targeted by online ventures since the dotcom era.

The current generation includes Seattle’s Porch.com – a fast-growing startup that’s also building off a database of project and contractor details – and Zillow, which offers pricing estimates and referrals on the “Digs” service that it launched in February 2013.

Williams said this time around there’s a better chance to automate the industry because smartphones are ubiquitous. Owners of service businesses can run complex applications and schedule on the fly, moving their companies toward an “on demand” model.

As for his cross-town rivals, Williams said he has “a ton of respect for the team over at Porch” but his company is “playing in a very different space” with its pricing approach.

“It’s a little bit different but the bottom line is the space is enormous,” he said. “Any of us will take years to make any kind of a dent or inroad in this industry. But I think the right customer experience will lead the company down that path.”

Pro.com may also benefit from Amazon fairy dust floating around South Lake Union.

More than half of its 30 employees are Amazon veterans and the company deliberately chose an office in Amazonville, to be close to friends and former co-workers. It’s temporarily working from the former Enterprise car rental office near Whole Foods, behind covered-up windows and chipped paint that belie the presence of a home-improvement venture.

The Seattle Times

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Pro.com has \$3.5 million in seed funding from Jeff Bezos and a handful of venture capital firms, including early Amazon investor Madrona Venture Group plus Andreessen Horowitz and Redpoint Ventures.

A chunk of the funding was spent acquiring the Pro.com domain from a Belgian tech company that reserved the name awhile ago but hadn't been using it, Williams said.

Williams – who comes from a family of Seattle-area entrepreneurs including a father who started KUBE radio, left Amazon in 2010 to become chief executive of Digg.com. After the online news and discussion site was sold in 2012 he became an entrepreneur-in-residence at Andreessen Horowitz before starting Pro.com.

For now Pro.com is working behind the covered-up windows of a run-down former car rental office just south of Whole Foods, between Amazon's current and forthcoming headquarters sites. Williams said it will move into new offices nearby when the building is demolished to make way for more new construction.

The company provided screenshots, including this one:

The screenshot shows the Pro.com website interface. At the top left is the Pro.com logo. To the right, there is a phone number 1-800-597-4776, a link to 'Ask a question', and a 'Sign in' button. Below the header, there is a profile for 'Dave Crompton Monet Home Services' with a 'Select Date' button. To the right of the profile are buttons for 'Add your contact information' and 'Add details (optional)'. The main content area is titled 'Scheduling a pro for:' and lists several services with their price ranges: 'Paint a Room' (\$545 - \$577), 'Repair Drywall or Sheetrock' (\$259 - \$295), 'Remove Trash, Junk, or Debris' (\$88 - \$107), and 'Install Closet Organization System' (\$985 - \$1220). Below these is a 'Summer Chores Total Preestimate' of \$1877 - \$2199. A note at the bottom of the list states '- Costs are for labor only -'. The scheduling interface shows a calendar for 'May 12 - May 16'. The days are Monday (12), Tuesday (13), Wednesday (14), Thursday (15), and Friday (16). For each day, there are time slots: 9am, 11am, 1pm, and 3pm. The 9am slot is highlighted in orange for all days. The 11am, 1pm, and 3pm slots are highlighted in orange for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, but are greyed out for Monday. At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with links for 'Terms of Service', 'Privacy Policy', and '© Copyright 2014, Pro.com'.

Link: <http://blogs.seattletimes.com/brierdudley/2014/05/13/16734/>