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The Most Important Resource



By Scott Burt

The intent of this column is to review the products, processes and systems that help paint contractors to achieve the best results in the most efficient way. Sometimes in the hustle and bustle of keeping our businesses in motion we overlook or take for granted the most important resource involved in our operations: the people.

You

For most paint contracting companies, the owner is the most important piece of the puzzle. Whether for a one-man shop or a large multiple-crew outfit, the vision, drive and business acumen of the owner will ultimately determine the course that the business takes and its definition of success. You are the force that makes your business what it is. Anything related to any aspect of the business – marketing, sales, hiring, firing, cash flow, quality control and profit – all point back to you and the decisions you make.

In the paint industry, it is a copout to point to other external forces such as the economy, consumer spending habits, lowballers, illegal workers, lack of qualified technicians, etc., as obstacles to reaching our goals. These are realities, but in the end, the day each of us hung a shingle with our name on it, we basically agreed to be the person who would take on those challenges. Blaming anything for our shortcomings is fruitless. Finding solutions is the only course. The solution is people.

Your People

The people whom we hire and send out into the field to execute our vision are the second-most-critical aspect of the operation. This is where many contractors miss the boat. Taking a defeatist attitude, resigning themselves to the perception that it's impossible to find qualified help causes many paint contractors to try to wear all the hats all at once every day. Anyone who has done that for any extended period of time would agree that it is nearly impossible to try to be in the field 40 hours per week spreading paint and running your business – marketing, estimating, selling, procuring materials, ensuring customer satisfaction – in your spare time. This leads to the 60-hour-week treadmill to burnout land.

There is no denying that it is difficult to assemble a crew in the paint trades. The percentage of young people entering the trades has been in a state of decline over the past couple of decades. It is possible to find young people who are willing to work and learn the skills of a professional painter, but it does take some legwork on your part to advertise; locate them; screen and interview them; hire, train and supervise them. Many contractors stop right there, thinking that they can't afford to put any time and energy into these aspects of their businesses. So, they try to hire painters who have experience, with the intention of being able to plug them into the field with immediate results. This is a rarity as well.

Most of us have a pretty specific set of quality standards, processes that we prefer to use to get the job done and the tools required to do so. While the general principles may be similar from one business to another, the specific operational details

are often different. Expecting a previously self-employed painter or one who has worked for another company to come in and instantly do things the way you do is unrealistic. Training and supervision is where many contractors miss the mark. The “if they are any good, they will already know what I want” fantasy simply doesn't work.

The single biggest flaw that I have seen in some paint contractors is the misperception that “no one else can paint like me; I must do it all myself.” Chris Toscano, president of New England Painting Services, Inc., states that “my employees give me the confidence to have multiple jobs running and knowing that the same level of quality, production and respect is being carried out without me there.” Toscano has been in business for 10 years and currently has 20 employees. It's really a matter of setting the ego aside, accepting the fact there are other good painters available who would be happy to work for you and meet your operational standards if you are willing to roll up your sleeves and supervise: to communicate your expectations and provide feedback as needed. Another common mistake is to wait to hire until you need help. You should always be on the lookout for the right person and be aware that it can take time to hire. Typically, we will advertise for two to three weeks and interview for two weeks, and often the new person won't start for another two weeks after that. It can take anywhere from six to eight weeks to get a good new person aboard, so it is important to be able to predict when you will need a new person in the field and to act well in advance. It is difficult to do all this yourself while sling-painting 40 hours per week. Chris Toscano sums it up well: “Because of my

employees, my company has grown and become more successful, in turn giving more painters promising careers in a company they can be proud to be a team member with.”

Your Customers

Knowing who your customers are and how to attract them and build relationships with them is also a key part of the “people” equation. The cash flow and profitability that your customers offer in return for your services is the fuel that keeps you going. This is why service-related businesses in the construction field are referred to as the “trades.” Your customers are the arbiters of what you do. Your success depends on them. Your ability to sell fairly to them and provide a level of service that will please them points very critically back to you and your people. I tell my customers that I would never hire an employee whom I wouldn’t be comfortable putting unsupervised in my own home. This is a very good rule of thumb.

Communication

Given the reality that your business is about people, and not totally about quality craftsmanship, it is not difficult to see that communication skills are critical to success. The ability to communicate expectations to your staff, correct them and provide constructive criticism when necessary is essential. The return on that investment of time and energy will be a crew of painters whom you can ultimately train to the point of working independently so that you can remove yourself from the field as needed to continue to grow your business.

Interactions with your potential, current and past customers will continue to be the fuel that keeps you going. There has never been a more important time than now to take a good, honest, objective look in the mirror to make sure that you are presenting yourself to people properly. We are all seeing unusual consumer behavior patterns that, if we don’t adjust our attitudes, can be discouraging and lead us down the road of cynicism, even the hint of which becomes cancerous to our internal operations and our outward interactions with customers.

Solutions


Networking is one way to solve some of these people challenges. But you have to be available to network and make yourself available to opportunities. Last spring, my company became involved in a state-funded program that is designed to encourage women to enter the trades. There has historically been a decided lack of women involved in the trades,

and we recognized that some of our best painters over the past 12 years have been women. So we became volunteer sponsors of the program and had the opportunity to instruct a group of women on everything from the basics of the trade to how to set up, prep and paint a large room. Any opportunity you have to support new people entering the field should be a no-brainer.

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The author supervises painters in a Department of Labor-funded "Step up to Painting" program to train and encourage women to enter the paint trades.

The condition of our workforce is not going to improve until each of us takes some individual responsibility for taking painters into the field and teaching them the craft of the professional painter. I would encourage any contractor to become more involved in looking for opportunities that would advance not only our individual operation, but also the trade as a whole. I can tell you from personal experience that there is just about no better feeling than hiring an experienced painter who was properly trained from day one. One of our best painters came from a company in Boston called Catchlight Painting, where he had worked for four years. I was so happy to see his skill set and work habits, and happy to integrate him into our crew, but also thankful to Catchlight Painting for having such a solid apprenticeship program in place.

Being a small paint contracting business owner can feel like an isolated place

to be. There are times when you will feel like nothing more than a conduit between your customers and your staff. If you are feeling like a "middleman", burnout is not far around the corner. Just ask yourself how many more years you will really want to raise the 32-foot ladders or mask and spray all by yourself. If you are honest with yourself and consider the possibilities, you may see something better than the way you are currently operating. It's important to consider the reality that there is a lot more to this business than trucks, tools, equipment and product knowledge. These may be the very things that are hindering your ability to improve your business. Your people and your skills in dealing with them may be the missing piece of the puzzle.

Most of us didn't enter the realm of paint contracting as businessmen first. We came in as craftsmen, with special skills and talents as painters. We generally navigate the path our businesses will

take as it unfolds before us. Unless we choose to work solo and well in excess of 40 hours in and out of the field, it takes other people and the willingness to grow in order to get to the next level of business ownership. It is possible to be so busy spreading paint that you don't even realize that your business as a whole is suffering as a result of the quality service you are trying to provide. Now is a great time to find employees who are willing to work hard and appreciate having a job. The paradox is that now is also not the easiest time to generate enough work for a lot of employees. This is your challenge. Take a step back, see the world beyond your front door, figure out how you want your business to fit into the industry, get the right people on board and go make it happen. **APC**

Scott Burt is a painting contractor who owns and operates Topcoat Finishes Inc. of Jericho, Vt. He can be reached at www.topcoatfinishes.com.