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Seattle-area firm reveals its recipe to success

## Technology, growth meld at Universal Mechanical

It's no surprise that, with neighbors like Boeing, Microsoft and Starbucks Coffee, Seattle area companies of much lesser size occasionally feel a sense of inferiority. To say that a business is "growing" begs the question: by what standard?

Here in one of the world's most extraordinary markets, one firm that's confident of its growth and stature is Redmond, Wash.-based Universal Mechanical Service Company Inc. Founded in 1986 by Duff Branin, proudly still skipper of the ship, Universal has grown to include 40 employees and expects to top \$10 million in sales this year.

Today, about 70% of the firm's work is commercial, 15% is residential, and 15% is service-related. And, in direct correlation to this, Universal operates three divisions: commercial, residential and service. Geographically, they're focused on the Seattle, Redmond, Kirkland and Bellevue areas.

Successfully straddling commercial and residential work in this marketplace illustrates the firm's versatility. The company was founded chiefly as a commercial firm, taking on demanding HVAC jobs such as clean room and computer facility applications. They also developed what has now become the core of the business: commercial office space and industrial work, typically for buildings in the 100,000 to 500,000-sq.-ft. range. Their work includes restaurants, warehouses and private schools.

As one of the region's key players in the commercial market, they eagerly take on VAV systems up to 130 tons, highly specialized computer room and clean room system design and installation and tightly engineered, multi-zone hydronic systems.

Though, about 10 years ago, the firm saw real opportunity in the residential and service business and branched into them with immediate success. For all three divisions, most business is tied to referrals from existing customers.

"One of things we've learned along the way is that we have to provide great — no, exceptional — service to our customers, or someone else will," said Branin. And it all begins at the first visit. "All of our projects start out with a computerized heat loss/heat gain calculation for accurate sizing of equipment. Some of our competitors don't do this. We also participate in pre-design meetings with developers and general contractors, another step that some firms prefer not to take."

Universal's management team

includes Branin, owner of the firm, Keith Reich, vice president and Matt Plughoff, residential general manager.

Shortly after he began operations as Universal Mechanical, Branin hired longtime friend Keith Reich who had worked with Branin in the past at another local HVAC firm. "I started out wearing the tool belt. In those days, we



The Universal Mechanical brain trust (r to l): Keith Reich, vice president; Duff Branin, owner; Misty Mangini, operations manager; and Matt Plughoff, general manager, residential.

did time and material billing, but it wasn't too long before we saw the value of moving to flat rate pricing."

"We also pride ourselves as technology-savvy," added Reich. "Here in the Seattle area, you might say it's part of our heritage. We're quick to track new and emerging solutions to professional challenges."

I guess you could say we're 'early adapters' of professional technology," he continued. "We're usually quick to apply tools and techniques that improve efficiency and growth."

An example of how Universal has tethered its growth to emerging technology is their use of Opportunity Manager, an HVAC contracting management and sales presentation software package offered by Opportunity Interactive.

Universal was one of the first companies to implement Opportunity Manager when it was first released in 2000. And, as they integrated Opportunity Manager into their operations, managers used the software platform to help them shift the business' focus as they formed the residential retrofit division.

The new division grew rapidly, exceeding all expectations. "And it continues to grow today," said Plughoff. "We attribute a substantial part of that success to the capabilities of the Opportunity Manager software, which we implemented at virtually all

levels of the division's operations."

The residential division now has four retail sales professionals on staff, all of whom organize their work and interactions with customers around the Opportunity Manager platform. "Essentially, we've built our sales practices around the capabilities of the program," said Plughoff. Revealing of their

success: they've increased their activity in the Trane/Home Depot initiative and have since earned the award for the highest average Home Depot sales in the region, and are always near the top in closing ratios.

"Opportunity Manager permits our sales staff to close sales faster and create job packets with a single click," said Plughoff. "It's a computerized selling platform that streamlines the process of tracking prospects and closing sales, and takes the burden out of converting a sales call to an installation."

According to Reich, the software is designed to grow and evolve with the company, readily accommodating more sales personnel as they're added. "It's all-encompassing. We track all of our sales with it, with details on labor rates, budgets, component costs and anticipated time to do all facets of any given job.

"We now use Opportunity Interactive routinely," added Reich. "It's the use of these tools, which are entirely different from the ones that I wore in my tool belt when I was in the field, that has consistently boosted our growth in a market where other firms consistently fail or poke along with no real progress or success. And because these tools change and evolve, we need to adapt to them, and have grown in the process, applying the software's capabilities to our hiring process, sales presentations, prof-

itability coaching, and service and residential operations."

While Plughoff's sales pros complete a call, the program's "Instant Job Packet" offers the instruction sheet, pull sheet, load calculations, details and photos of the existing installation, and info for the installer on the homeowner's comfort concerns. HVAC managers can easily change the costs and margins of any product with a few clicks of the mouse. Opportunity Manager also generates reports with job budgets.

According to Branin, the software allows their sales pros to sit in front of the customer while entering installation notes, scope of work information, and an itemized list of everything included in the job. "For the customer, it takes the mystery, and a lot of the intimidation, out of the sales process," he said. "From a manager's perspective, it allows me to review job budgets, labor budgets, and performance data."

"About two years ago I started using Opportunity Interactive's 'Personality Assessment Tests.' This is a real benefit for people that hire," added Plughoff. "It's objective, balanced and fair in profiling candidates. It lets me know about the candidate's traits that aren't on a resume. And, it gives me a chance to ask insightful follow-up questions. Without overstating the benefit of the profile, if a candidate falls into the benchmarks, then I typically know I have a good fit. As a result, we've been able to build a team with a strong foundation based on a collection of shared talents."

The assessment tests are completed



Ted Downey, senior installer, loads equipment into his cube truck.

online and through email and use specific job description benchmarks to test how suitable a particular individual is for a specific job description. It's tailored precisely for HVAC firms with tests for 20 different positions, including billing clerk, field supervisor, installer, operations manager, receptionist, sales coordinator, service technician, and shop fabricator.

The test carefully collects data and assesses a candidate's ability to work with numbers, words, shapes, people, data and tasks; even offering a behavioral examination of one's social desirability. ■