

Bassett Sprinkler learns to forge own path



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Unfortunately, too many contractors have a reputation for imperfect management. Many live project-to-project, perfecting their trades without ever developing their businesses. This haphazard approach may work during times of plenty...but as we in Northeast Ohio know all too well, the good times aren't built to last.

The challenge

Mark Bassett, president of Bassett Sprinkler Protection, Inc. (BSPI), isn't a typical contractor. BSPI is a full fire-protection sprinkler contractor with in-house design capability and a reputation for quality, responsiveness, and completing projects on time and on budget. The company's focus on service and delivery (and neglect of marketing) worked fine until Ohio industry, which accounted for nearly three-quarters of BSPI's business, began to falter.

Ironically, Mark's 25-plus years of experience slowed his ability to seek help. First, there was his attitude of 'I know what I'm doing and don't need help,' coupled with 'The economy's bad and no one can fix it.'" Mark continued the status quo, advertising in trade magazines and relying on positive word-of-mouth, but sales flagged along with the region's economy. "I got to the point of realizing I needed a fresh approach," he says, "and then I hired Andy."

I view Bassett as a "role model" for all contractors and subcontractors. So many of them are inadequate man-

Become proactive rather than reactive by realizing your Best and Highest Use and taking a clear look at your business

agers, even though they excel at very complex and critical tasks. Mark really wanted to be taught how to create new opportunities for himself and his company.

The solution

Mark and I first clarified the major objectives of our work together—to increase sales 25-30% by 2006. His first task was to discover his company's and his own Best and Highest Use (BHU), a term I own and use to keep clients on track with their own true purposes. "Andy made me think deeply about what I'm best at doing, what I enjoy doing, and what our customers value about us," says Mark, "moving us into creative possibility thinking." The most "instrumental" step in this process involved speaking with BSPI's customers, the GCs and direct-to-industry customers, to ask what they like about the firm. Both segments placed a high level of trust in the company. These dialogues also gave Mark a vision of the BSPI's future, when he asked them what the company needed to do to, on a scale of one to 10, to be rated a 10."

I next led Mark through a detailed analysis of the company's last three years of business, answering four basic questions: Who buys from us? What is the person's title? How did we sell and negotiate the project? Where do we earn our highest margins?

The data showed that BSPI's best margins are in the declining industrial manufacturing segment, confirming Mark's commitment to a more proac-

tive way of doing business. Though reluctant to share sales data with employees, he followed my suggestion to get his team on board. He met with his staff, presenting the past sales data, his goals for 2006, and the sales forecasts we had developed for each segment. "The reaction was mostly positive," Mark recalls; a second meeting showed everyone the need to pick up the pace.

The result

Mark is enthusiastic about the direction of his company and his role in leading it. The sales forecasts now guide the company in choosing tactics and tracking results. "We are working toward different aspects of revenue and prospecting," says Mark. For example, he is working with Felber & Felber Marketing to sell more inspection and service-related work to industry. "Now if I am not selling a project, I might instead be selling customers an interpretation of code issues or some other piece of our expertise that falls under the service category," Mark says. "We get paid for the service, and I'm also gaining a potential customer for larger add-on projects, including insurance recommendations, changes in occupancy, classifications, and storage, as well as remodeling and building projects."

In addition, Mark is capitalizing on his personal BHU by marketing his expertise through publishing articles in trade magazines and seeking speaking opportunities. The low-cost, high-

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recognition nature of "expert marketing" allows BSPI to deepen relationships with existing customers while looking for new ones. And, by asking each new customer how they heard about Bassett Sprinkler, the company is able to track leads, thus adjusting its tactics to reach a broad customer base cost-effectively.

Mark Bassett is a true exception to the vast lot of contractors who feel hostage to external events. Armed with specific objectives, performance data, forecasts, and tactics, he feels a new sense of control. "No more settling for leftovers," he says. "We can start leading the way." **BXM**

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