PARTNERSHIPS HELP PLUMBERS KEEP IT IN THE FAMILY

The road to success for family businesses is lined with passion, commitment and solid relationships

North Olmsted, Ohio… Family-run businesses are the engines that drive the U.S. economy. They account for 62 percent of this country’s employment and 64 percent of its gross domestic product, according to Trusts & Estates magazine\(^1\). Family businesses also are responsible for 78 percent of job creation, claims Businessweek\(^2\). In a perfect world, the moms and dads creating these businesses pass them along to sons and daughters, who in turn, bring new energy and new ideas. In the real world, only 30 percent survive to be passed on to the next generation, and only 12 percent make it to a third.

Plumbing is the quintessential family-business profession, possessing the same potential – as well as the same pitfalls – as described in the statistics above. Plumbing businesses surviving into second and third generations – or even longer – succeed mainly because of the willingness of successors to step up and deliver sound business strategies and tactics, including developing strong partnerships with key suppliers.

Following in Their Footsteps

In 1985, Ted and Wendy Zurn, who had long dreamed of starting their own plumbing business, did just that. They formed Zurn Plumbing in Chamblee, Georgia, backed by a single truck and a home office. Ted, a third-generation master plumber, left a management position at a full-service plumbing company to chase the dream. That pursuit also made quite an impression on Ted’s son Matt, who experienced the business from an early age.

“I’ve been around plumbing my entire life,” says Matt, recalling that as a kid he’d go out on service calls with his dad.

All of that time visiting customers convinced Matt to stick with plumbing, and the family business. Today, a master plumber with a business management degree to boot, Matt serves as general manager of the 16-employee company. Daughter Lisa is also in the business. Coblentz Plumbing represents another succession success, again thanks to a father-son bond.
Like Zurn, Wendell Coblentz had grown up around the plumbing trade. On weekends and over the summers, he’d tag along with his dad, who worked for a local plumbing company. In 1978, after Coblentz graduated from high school, his dad decided to go into business for himself in Hartville, Ohio, doing plumbing work primarily for new construction. Looking to expand his horizons, Coblentz moved to Indiana and pursued both a journeyman’s and master’s licenses through another plumbing company. He specialized in service work, and upon returning home helped form and head up a service department at his dad’s company.

In 1996, Coblentz bought the service operation, and by 2006 had purchased his dad’s entire business. Plumbing is in the family’s blood, as Coblentz and three of his four brothers have pursued plumbing as careers, with Coblentz looking to pass the business to a third generation. His wife and stepson both work for Coblentz Plumbing, and a grandson is on board in the summers until he heads to college this fall.

**Ideal Supplier Partner Knows Plumbers’ Wants and Needs**

Just as sons and daughters must feel a strong bond to a business for it to succeed across generations, the same holds true for professional partners, be they associations, manufacturers, or wholesalers and distributors. These strong partnerships begin with a common mission to ensure that end-use customers have the right products and a level of customer service that they desire and demand.

Coblentz credits association membership for providing instruction and networking that allowed his company to succeed and introduced him to quality peers in the plumbing business. He also credits, along with Matt Zurn, professional partners that understand a plumbing company’s needs. Both Coblentz Plumbing and Zurn Plumbing have developed close partnerships, nurtured across generations, with Moen.

“I grew up with Moen,” says Coblentz. “It’s the only brand my father used and Moen has been our primary faucet provider since the 1970s. We can contact our Moen representative any time of the day or night and he will go to bat for us.”

Long-term relationships, such as these between supplier and business owner, rely on product quality and dependability, trust and service. Recognizing that, Moen goes to great lengths to learn what plumbers need to be successful.
“Our approach starts upfront with understanding our consumers’ needs,” says Aaron Bores, director of global design quality at Moen. “‘Consumer’ means both the person that’s going to use the product, but also the person installing it.”

Understanding those needs entails a lot of face time. “It’s always fun to go out in the field and meet with the plumbers, develop relationships, and understand what their needs and wants are,” explains Jerry Capasso, Moen product manager. “You can’t understand what plumbers really go through until you see it for yourself. So we often visit jobsites and observe plumbers and inquire, ‘what are your obstacles; why are you doing something a certain way.’”

An Easier Path for Plumbers
Knowing the challenges that small business owners face – particularly plumbers – it’s important for manufacturers to be cognizant of overhead and inventory costs. To help streamline the number of parts plumbers need to keep on hand, Moen maintains common cartridges across many of its faucet lines, not only easing installation and repair, but relieving some of the stress when it comes to stocking parts.

“A plumber can go to a job and know that he has the right part to fix that faucet on his truck, and that’s a huge advantage for the plumber… and for Moen,” says Randy Seemiller, Moen senior territory manager.

Such a small element within the design process makes a big impact for plumbing customers. “The job gets done a lot quicker and we can move on to the next project, allowing us to save our customers time and money, too,” offers Coblentz.

Plumbers see the commitment to easing their worries and workloads, and appreciate it. “Moen is listening, and its research is reflective in the products,” says Zurn. “We would only sell people things that we would put in our own home.”

Coblentz concurs. “When you pick up a Moen faucet, you feel the quality in it,” he says. “It has substance to it. It’s something you can put a beating on and it will hold up for years.”

Much like a time-tested family-owned business.
Support Aids Survival…and Success

Hard reality reveals that generational businesses face an uphill battle, be it in plumbing or any other field. From parents to sons and daughters and beyond, there are no guarantees that a company will survive. But having a strong partner in your corner can tilt the odds. It certainly has for Zurn and Coblentz.

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About Moen
As the #1 faucet brand in North America, Moen offers a diverse selection of thoughtfully designed kitchen and bath faucets, showerheads, accessories, bath safety products and kitchen sinks for residential applications – each delivering the best possible combination of meaningful innovation, useful features, on-trend styling and lasting value. In addition, Moen® Commercial offers superior-performing products that deliver lower lifetime costs for today’s facilities.

Moen is part of Fortune Brands Home & Security, Inc. (NYSE: FBHS), which creates products and services that help fulfill the dreams of homeowners and help people feel more secure. The Company’s trusted brands include Moen® faucets, Master Lock® and Sentry® Safe security products, MasterBrand® cabinets and Therma-Tru® entry door systems. Fortune Brands holds market leadership positions in all of its segments. Fortune Brands is part of the S&P MidCap 400 Index. For more information, please visit www.FBHS.com.

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