



CUSTOMER SERVICE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

by Molly E. Butz

For Blenker, a pocket full of cleverness, an eye for quality and a mission to serve serves up the perfect recipe.

As you pull into their parking lot in rural Amherst, WI, the Blenker Building Systems empire sprawls out before you. The impressive brick installment up front looks more like a swanky seafood and steak house than a construction showroom and corporate office. And the manufacturing facility in the rear, well, it's just plain huge. But, Blenker wasn't always the 90,000 square foot, one-stop construction shopping spectacle it is today. Back in 1974, Blenker was your basic general contracting and remodeling business and decisions were made at the kitchen table. However, no matter what else changes, the most important things have remained the same throughout the last 30 years: ingenuity, quality and good old-fashioned customer service.



at a glance

- ❑ Blenker's business is built on ingenuity, quality and customer service.
- ❑ A unique internal cross-training approach fosters self-respect and teamwork.
- ❑ Offering a one-stop shop means providing a complete service for their builder customers.

The ingenuity began in the mid-90s when Peter Blenker decided to begin manufacturing wall panels for the homes he was contracted to build. Pre-manufacturing wall panels utilizing an indoor crew gave Peter the control he needed to be most effective as a contractor. Wall panels allowed for much greater control of costs, work environment, scheduling and possibly most importantly, quality. Pre-manufacturing also gave him the opportunity to provide better customer service, which blossomed from the inside out. Yes, it meant providing reasonably priced, higher quality products to the buyer, but it also meant serving his framing crew more readily with on-time output that was straightforward and speedy to install. (Not to mention using great lumber and always plumb!)

As the wall panel manufacturing business grew, Jason Blenker, Peter's son and

"Communication is the key, and we consistently set up face-to-face meetings in our office, and are out on the jobsite constantly. It's an essential part of our customer service."

current president of Blenker Building Systems, got involved in the family business and continued channeling the values that the family implemented from the start. And although the Blenker business has expanded by leaps and bounds, the culture and atmosphere are grounded in their original beginnings in wall panel manufacturing.

Today, Jason manages the new 85,000 square foot manufacturing facility and the additional 6,500 square feet of office and showroom space at Blenker Building Systems. He continues to stress the importance of serving his customers from the inside-out and is proud of the wall panels they produce.

Subtle improvements have been made over the years to ensure their products' quality. For starters, Blenker switched to a minimum of 1650 MSR lumber to minimize problems with their cutting and marking equipment. This automatically makes it easier for his crews to assemble the wall panels. According to their customers, this is a winning combination. "Because of Blenker's new automatic cutting systems they use a very high grade of stud, and the computer compensation of the saw cuts even slightly twisted lumber true. The resulting panels are of a noticeably higher quality for professionals that work with them in the field," said Scott Irwin, of I3SM, LLC in Peru, IL.

Justin M. Ballard, Senior Project Manager for Advanced Building Corporation agrees. "Blenker gives us the edge. We can competitively price while continuing to provide high quality wall panels in our finished projects. Blenker's panels are more true than any other builder I've worked with and we end up saving money down the line during drywall, trim and cabinet installation because the walls are straight." There you have it, serving internally and externally at the same time.

Blenker also worked a bit of automated magic when they installed "lumber trains" in their new facility. "I bought a fleet of used electric forklifts for a good price from eBay," Jason explained. (Forklifts? eBay? Who knew?) "And we modified them to work with our lumber carts and then added a remote control unit to each one. The electric forklifts make

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These "lumber trains" are an example of Blenker ingenuity that has made their workflow and materials handling easier and more efficient.



Blenker's heritage as builders gives them a "framers point of view" as they grow their business.



Walls are loaded on the delivery truck so framers can work in sequence, eliminating the need for double handling.

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it easy, everything is enclosed, and the remote controls work with a wireless system, so it only takes one person to run the saw and the train," he said.

Another reason Blenker has been so successful is because of its heritage as builders. "A lot of truss companies are manufacturing wall panels. We feel as though our 'framers point of view' gives us an advantage. We can serve our customers better because we understand what they want; we've done it ourselves. Wall panels are a very unique business, with their own quality, material handling and jobsite delivery issues."

"We load all of our walls in a sequence so the framers can work right down the line. There's no double handling and they can build the entire house as it's delivered right off of the trailer," Jason described. "We take great care in making sure nothing gets broken during loading or shipping and then we crane them off in groups rather than using the more common roll-off trailers."

It comes as no surprise that their customers notice the difference. Mark Robinson of Robinson Homes appreciates the quality and attention to detail he sees in Blenker's work. "I've used other companies in the past and what I like about Blenker is that their product comes out square and true," Mark said. "And they also take great care in packaging and delivering their material. That's really what sets them apart in the industry."

Blenker's Top Five:

- Inter-departmental Cross-Training
- Meaningful Customer Care
- Creative Material Handling Solutions
- Employee Collaboration
- Product Line Expansion

Blenker's approach to knowledge and training is also unique, because every employee is cross-trained for various job positions. "Even if the person we hire has experience, they start out in the shop building wall panels," Jason said. This allows Jason to evaluate each new staff member's skill set and teach new skills where necessary. It also allows for a three- to four-month period to learn the tools and systems at Blenker. "I like each department to have knowledge of what the others are doing.

So after three or four months we try to rotate them out into the field," Jason added.

That's right, in addition to manufacturing wall panels, Blenker has continued to employ three framing crews that go

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"We've instilled a culture where people can bring their ideas to the table and know that they will be heard."

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out to the jobsite and install them once they have been produced. Jason explained that starting an employee on wall panels and then cross-training helps each individual understand why they build the panels in a certain way and why it's important to do everything right from assembly and loading to delivery.

In addition, cross-training adds to the atmosphere of teamwork and internal service that runs rampant at Blenker. "There's just more ownership and they have a deeper respect for themselves and the demands that are placed on others," Jason told *SBC* staff. And if their products are a true reflection of the company culture, then it is obvious that customer service at Blenker starts on the inside. "We've always valued all of our employees," Jason said. "We've instilled a culture where people can bring their ideas to the table and know that they will be heard. From the guy sweeping the floor to the guy managing the department, every idea is worth listening to. And we're always willing to make changes to make their



Blenker's cross-training program gives employees a clearer picture of the whole business and feeds the company's culture of customer service.



A high grade of machine-rated lumber and a new automatic cutting system makes a winning combination for producing quality components at Blenker.

jobs more efficient. We've gone so far as to custom build some equipment based on suggestions from our employees."

Wall panel production and framing have continued to be a big part of Blenker's business. But a growing market has resulted in changing customer demands, which in turn has necessitated their latest expansion. Soon after their wall panel business took off, Blenker added a floor panel manufacturing line. The new facility has allowed for expanded wall and floor panel production and the addition of a roof truss line.

"We realized we were purchasing a lot of roof trusses from outside vendors," Jason said. "Producing our own trusses gave us the same control we had over wall panels, including cost, work environment, scheduling and quality. Plus, it was another opportunity to increase customer service, because now we could offer components for the whole house."

"I'd estimate that 95 percent of our residential packages include all of the structural elements," Jason continued. "We can offer our customers compo-



A vertical truss stacker aids in finished product handling on Blenker's new roof truss line.



Great care is taken in the packaging and delivery area so that nothing is damaged before the customer receives it.

nents that have been engineered for the entire structure. We can transfer loads through the roof down to the floor and know we're providing a better quality product because it's a more convenient product."

The expansion is proving to be a success. "Robinson Homes does things a little bit different. We're a true general contractor," Mark explained. "Everything we do is sub-contracted out. Blenker can supply all of the materials, labor and installation. They're a perfect fit for us. I am very pleased with them. And now that they have expanded in so many directions, I'm using them exclusively."

Jason has been personally happy with the expansion as well. "I grew up in this business, working at lumber yards in high school and college, so I was always involved in the 'supplying' business. I grew to understand that it's important for a good business to be efficient and customer-friendly. As I got more involved in our family business, expanding our product line just made sense as our customers' needs became more diverse."

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service is remarkable. They're very tuned-in to getting problems solved and their team is extremely knowledgeable. They always do exactly what they say they'll do.”

From Minnesota to Michigan, and a sharp eye on Iowa, Blenker's customer base is growing, and Jason will be the first to tell you why. “They're all number one to me, whether they buy two houses or 20. Each one is just as important as the next.” And although the single-family residential market in middle Wisconsin is slowing just a bit, Blenker is pleased to be diverse enough to keep up with the changes, gaining new multi-family and commercial customers regularly.

“We're not a commodity business because we're providing much more than just handing them a price,” Jason explained. “Our goal is to provide a complete service. We spend quality time with each of our customers. Now that we're providing structural components, windows, doors, siding and more, we're creating a one-stop shopping experience so that the customer knows that all the parts and pieces that go into a structure are going to fit.”

Advanced Building Corporation has found that working with Blenker simplifies their construction process. “Blenker can give us the quantity and sizing we need for larger jobs, and they are really a one-stop shopping center,” Justin said. “We can get everything we need from Blenker, from panels and trusses to windows to cabinets. I never have to make more than one phone call to get materials or have a problem solved. They've really helped our turnkey situation as a management company; we manage them and they manage the project.”

“I think this area of our business is my passion,” Jason concluded. “These days, a person's time is too valuable to be driving all over town picking up all the parts and pieces. That's why we offer a one-stop shop. Blenker makes it easy to be efficient.”

And at only 29, Jason is a young president who's come into his own. But how does he feel about all of his responsibilities? “President? To me it's just a title. We make decisions together, as a company. That way we know we're making the right decision for the business, the employees and most importantly, the customer.” **SBC**



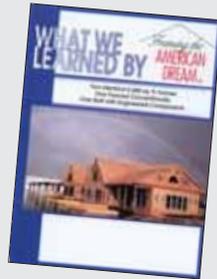
Resources for Your Wall Panel Business

If you're currently manufacturing and selling wall panels, or are looking to expand into the market, WTCA has resources you may find valuable:

What We Learned By Framing the American Dream®

This publication addresses the benefits of framing with roof trusses, floor trusses and wall panels versus traditional stick-framing methods. Specifically, it highlights the advantages of wall panels, which include:

- Walls are ensured to be square.
- Proper nailing patterns are used.
- Wall lumber is optimized.
- Sheathing can be pre-applied in the factory.
- Installation times are drastically reduced.



Truss Technology in Building (TTB): Considerations for Contractors Building with Wall Panels

This publication is aimed toward building contractors, covering several benefits of building with wall panels. In addition, this TTB includes a checklist for contractors to use in providing necessary information to their wall panel manufacturer. It also has a recommended procedure for wall panel installation.



New for 2006

WTCA is currently developing a new comprehensive, bilingual TTB entitled, *Proper Handling and Installation of Wall Panels*, which will cover manual lifting of wall panels, proper wall panel installation and bracing procedures, as well as recommendations on creating pre-installation plans and worksite safety zones to minimize wall panel damage and risk to workers on the jobsite.

If you have any additional ideas for wall panel manufacturing documents or other aids for this emerging industry segment, please contact WTCA staff at wtca@woodtruss.com. **SBC**

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