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Best Homes, Inc. Rebuilds after Devastating Fire by Libby (Maurer) Walters

"Of course there is no formula for success except perhaps an unconditional acceptance of life and what it brings." —Arthur Rubinstein

A fire that started at a neighboring business's maintenance building that Friday morning in March 2003 devastated Best Homes, Inc., the home of WTCA Past President Scott Arquilla's component manufacturing operation. The culprit was a welding project next door that ignited propane tanks, causing the fire to spread to the Best Homes wood roof within minutes. Because the fire started on the roof, the facility burned in record speed. Their Truss Technician manager, Roy Aldworth, was able to grab the computer server before the fire had spread to the office area, a measure that ended up saving the company's pending order files. The entire plant, save for a wood grinder, burned to the ground in less than one hour as Arquilla witnessed a disaster that few expect to experience in their lives: "As a business owner, planning is a necessary part of my job, but planning for a total fire loss is the last thing on everyone's mind." That's when Arquilla learned an important life lesson that translates to small business: Expect the unexpected.

Luckily, Arquilla and staff made it out of the building without physical injury, but the staff felt the emotional impact of the fire for months following the blaze. "We were mentally depressed and emotionally defeated," Arquilla remembers. However, there wasn't much time to mourn the loss. "It would have been easy for us to throw in the towel and not rebuild. But we quickly chose to rebuild," he says. With the demanding spring construction season just on the horizon, there were job orders to fill and customers to keep happy. Arquilla created a makeshift reception area in a storage trailer next door and all staff returned to work the following Monday. Several local truss manufacturers pitched in to fill existing orders while Arquilla and long-time plant manager Don Burge got creative, crafting an emergency mini-plant with odds and ends from....well, anywhere. "We used some old equipment that had been under a shed for a couple years to produce small span trusses: two vintage (1968) Idaco saws, two (one had survived the fire with just motor and 'electronics' damage) finish rollers and two sets of flip jig truss tables."



Burge and the production crew spent the better half of 2003 filling customer orders from underneath the open-air-lumber-shed-turned-truss-plant, with a rented generator to power the bare bones set-up of equipment without any lighting. The hardy crew spent many shifts outside in the raw northern Illinois winter. Throughout the entire winter season, below zero temperatures and snow storms caused the crew to halt production for less than five days, remembers Burge.

To the credit of the Best Homes management, not a single employee was lost or laid off throughout the disaster. "A few left for greener pastures, but everyone else returned from a brief layoff after the fire to work in our 'truss plant.' It was not easy to find jobs for all, but Don shortly added additional production areas to accommodate all who wanted to stay," said Scott Arquilla.

The effort to rebuild Best Homes began almost immediately. It started with Arquilla's staff creating a master list of everything lost in the plant and office area—from memory. He admits that not having a complete listing of contents, valuations and serial numbers of every piece of equipment with digital photos made the process much harder. "Prior to the fire, we did a poor job documenting all of our operations. A complete listing of equipment for proper insurance costing and replacement values would have saved us much time."

Their effort to rebuild also meant making sure existing Best Homes customers remained Best Homes customers. Arquilla remembers that his sales staff, led by General Manager Norris Cain, devised an approach to contact each customer with a pending order to assure them "we were still in business and would do whatever it took to ship their order on time." Cain says customers with pending orders were never delayed for more than a week.

"We couldn't have done it without the help of the area truss manufacturers," says Cain. Companies like Alexander Lumber Company in nearby Cortland completed Best Homes' orders in the months following the fire. "The way we handled the situation went as smoothly as could be expected. One customer said, 'If I hadn't known you burned, I wouldn't have known you burned,'" Cain recalls. A final PR effort shortly after the fire included a follow-up letter sent to existing customers to emphasize that Best Homes would stay in business and continue to serve them through the rebuilding process.

In less than one year since the fire, Best Homes, Inc. is up and running again with a brand new facility, new equipment and a fresh start. As the shock of the fire fades, the staff has realized the benefits of rebuilding from scratch. For instance, the office and reception area, once separated into two stories, has been converted into an efficient single-story space that also houses the truss technician department.

Surprisingly, the new building is smaller in total square footage (41,410 new vs. 42,246 old) than the original because the new layout has allowed for a more spatially-efficient production operation. Arquilla explains that an addition to the plant built in 1967 made for an inefficient production area. "The old plant consisted of two spaces separated by a concrete block wall, with only a 20-ft opening in which to transfer cut lumber to the production areas. At times, the wall

interrupted production flow." Another factor that impacted the new building's design had to do with the prevalent use of cranes for jobsite erection in the Chicagoland area, which require trusses to be delivered in an exact order. "In the old plant, we had one long 165 foot table with only two gantrys. The three crews would set their area up to make one type of truss, then create a different set-up for each additional truss type in the order the trusses were stacked on a trailer. That was the only way the sequencing could be accurate." To remedy part of the efficiency problem, Arquilla decided the new plant should be equipped with two tables, one 120 feet long for two crews and the other 78 feet long for one crew. Most importantly, each crew has their own gantry. "Now we don't have each crew fighting for a gantry to finish a truss," he says.

In addition, Arquilla saw the opportunity to install an improved stacking system in the new plant. "We used to have one stacker for the entire truss line, and it became very confusing at times. By splitting the lines and creating three multi-stacking systems, we have been able to use fewer employees to organize trusses in the correct order without any inefficiency." This more importantly allows each manufacturing crew to build the necessary number of truss types and then have the stackers reshuffle same so sequencing can be accomplished without tying up the production line.

"Is this the most automated plant there is? Heck no," Arquilla quips. "But it certainly meets the demands of our market and customers." Budget restrictions, insurance limitations and time influenced his many decisions about rebuilding the plant. "We were in an insurance coverage limitation situation and we couldn't pick every bit of automation available. Just like most of us, we had to sacrifice certain things in order to get back up and running within budget." Future automation will always be considered, says Arquilla.

Remarkably, Best Homes' customer base actually increased over the course of the rebuilding process, says Cain. Could it have something to do with the stepped-up Best Homes customer service management through the fire and the rebuilding process? Cain said, "We knew we had to equal or surpass the level of service our customers had been accustomed to. And that's exactly what we did."

Long-time Best Homes customer Jim Sylvester, Manager of First Country Homes LLC, can attest to the staff's dedication to accommodating everyone, at any cost: "If I hadn't been contacted early on by Best Homes staff about the fire, I would never have known that the operation burned. We had orders pending at the time of the fire, and I was impressed that all our deliveries were made on time. I know the Best Homes staff spent many, many hours trying to make sure their customers were taken care of. We certainly appreciated their efforts."

Arquilla has learned a great deal in the rebuilding process, and his advice for anyone dealing with a similar situation could be applied to someone remodeling their current operation or starting a new plant as well. "First of all, be comfortable with whoever is giving you advice. Don't ask absolutely everyone for their opinion. Choose a few individuals you trust and go from there," he suggests. "Likewise, when you shop around, don't try to shop every single product manufacturer with every need. It's too easy to get overwhelmed when you request information from every supplier on the planet. Make sure you detail your needs in a long and specific list and then use that list as the guideline for weighing one product against another."

When it is all said and done, Best Homes has come out on top despite a devastating loss. Arquilla's inspirational maxim, "keep smiling," is exactly what the entire staff did to see them through the difficult times. There is much to gain from an experience like this: a brand new operation, greater production capacity, a new appreciation for customer service and a new definition of "disaster planning." More importantly, however, the Best Homes team gained the wisdom and confidence that comes with learning they possessed the strength and grace to get through it.

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