

Ask SCORE for Business Advice

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Success in Construction by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt

The construction sector has been one of those hardest hit by the recession. With declines in housing starts and commercial projects along with accompanying job losses, many construction companies find themselves struggling to hang on. However, other companies have noted a trend for consumers to rehab, renovate, and refinish rather than build or buy new. Many are benefiting and even thriving.

One of these companies is CTI of Wisconsin owned by Kathy and Tom Conard. Concrete has been in the family for years. Tom's father, Kermit, was self-employed in the concrete business long before his son took up the trade. Although the elder Conard worked in the basics, the younger Conards have expanded and adapted the business to meet industry trends.

"We don't quite look at concrete the same way," Kathy noted. "It's fun to be creative and strive to be the best at what we do. It's satisfying to see someone excited about their new concrete project or floor when it is completed – it doesn't have to be boring concrete anymore."

As consumers started to show interest in new concrete products, the Conards were the first to add concrete resurfacing. In 1994, they signed on with Concrete Technology, Inc. in Largo, Florida. It wasn't long before they were growing and adding installers in Wisconsin, Upper Michigan, Minnesota, and Northern Illinois. The installers buy and own an area, but purchase their product from the Conards. That allows for growth with minimum supervision.

Kathy says that success is due to featuring the latest trends in concrete and giving customers the option of saving money by reworking an existing surface with a new, decorative finish. She calls it "designer concrete" and it includes concrete countertops, colors and stains, flatwork, overlays, and stamping. The standard concrete finishes are also available. The result has been an increase in business.

"Our business is going strong and doing very well," Kathy noted. "New construction is down to almost nothing. However, remodeling projects are booming for us."

In addition to the decorative benefits, the product also satisfies the trend toward environmentally friendly products. She explained, "You have the option to resurface or recycle your concrete instead of hauling it to a landfill." Concrete is made from abundant and readily available ingredients and doesn't rely on scarce or non-renewable resources. Its durability means that it lasts longer, and when it is time to replace it, the concrete can be crushed and reused as an aggregate for new concrete.

For the Conards, that means a busy work schedule. In addition to CTI, they also own and operate Tom Conard Construction, started in 1987. They have defined roles within the businesses, but have a shared vision for growth. As the business prospers in use of new techniques and remodeling, Kathy insists that marketing is still vital.

“Keep advertising, don’t cut that out of your budget!” she advised. “Customers still need to know you’re there.”

If you’d like to learn more about business trends, contact the Green Bay Chapter of SCORE. Visit www.greenbayscore.org or call Cindy Gokey at 920-496-8930 for information.

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