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SEPTEMBER 2010

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K.C. Montgomery, namesake of Monty's Plumbing in San Diego.

ON THE COVER

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Pacific Plumbing Supply CEO Larry Solomon says listening to customers can be profitable. PPS Photo.

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT

All it took was listening to customers. Imagine that. That is a good thing for a service company to do, and that—and really good timing—is exactly what led Pacific Plumbing Supply into the eco-friendly plumbing products business.

The 61-year-old Seattle-based company has grown to 17 locations stretching to Alaska and Hawaii. The company also operates showrooms in Anchorage, in Hawaii on Maui in Kahului, and then in Seattle, Bellevue and Kent, Wash. Larry Solomon, the company's CEO, was initially hired in 1976, so he's seen some changes in the company's markets during his tenure. Most recently, he said customer demand led to the introduction of eco-friendly products in "The Green Room," an approximately 2,000 square foot area in the Seattle location that debuted with a gala celebration Mar. 11.

"We try to listen," Solomon said, noting the company's first experiences with hyper-efficient products began with the introduction of compact, powerful condensing boilers and small, efficient wall-hung equipment. Eventually Pacific Plumbing Supply

Customers demanded Pacific Plumbing Supply take the eco-friendly plunge

By Jack Sweet

found itself in something of a perfect storm as equipment became more efficient, various local and federal agencies began offering rebates and incentives for installing water- and energy-saving products and as his contractor customers' customers—the homeowners—began to become aware of and want to have efficient products installed.

"We're not strategists—we're trying to take care of our customers," Solomon said. "We were listening and they were asking for more of these kinds of products and we had the space here in our building. It was about 2,000 square feet that had previously been a contractor showroom. It had been sitting and we didn't know what we'd do with it. We started talking about displaying high-efficiency products. We caught a wave with that."

Indeed. Now known as The Green Room, Solomon said it has been a “really successful endeavor.” In addition to products, which can easily be swapped in, out, over, around and through as new technologies emerge, The Green Room is also designed to serve as a training facility.

“We’ve got a regular schedule of training that goes on there,” Solomon said. “Contractors are coming in to learn the new stuff about the new products all the time. It has been very good that way. The manufacturers have been extremely supportive and the time when traditionally a support for showroom in co-op funding has been tightened as a result of the great recession.”

Oh, yeah, there was something about some economic troubles in the paper a couple of years back. Adding eco-friendly products and training seems to have come along at a good time. You could say it has played a role in keeping Pacific Plumbing Supply strong.

“Indeed it has. When I look at the industry benchmarks that are provided by the American Supply Association—revenues and so forth—we have been fortunate to do well in comparison. I am sure a component of that is the growth in this segment of the business. The growth in the eco-friendly product category has helped us stave off that drop-off for sure. That and our expertise in the field in the form of people—in particular Joey Longo, who heads our radiant division. Because of that we are able to provide genuine service and assistance to the contractor when they need and want us to.”

One of the advantages of being a wholesaler is that the job comes with a 10,000 foot view of the industry, or at least your part of it. Solomon said he’s been hearing very good things from contractors in his areas. He said the company has been fortunate in that Alaska has been robust, providing continuing increased revenues.

Hawaii, Solomon said, is coming back: “Tourism and hotel occupancies and air travel has all been going up steadily every month. We’re almost back to pre-recession levels in that segment of the industry, which is critical to renovations, hotels and so forth. It’s been gathering strength. We are optimistic that there will be continuing recovery, as tepid as it’s been for the past couple of years, it does seem to be strengthening.”

Solomon also reports western Washington has been “a little more resilient” than other parts of the country. With unemployment hovering around 8.7 percent in June, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, Washington was indeed busier than the national average, job-wise, with the U.S. posting a 9.6 percent unemployment figure for the same period.

Maybe it’s also expected for western Washington to be a little more resilient on the eco-friendly front than the rest of the country. Seattle’s largest employer is a university, for crying out loud. Then figure the other big employment sectors in the area are healthcare, biotechnology, aerospace and information technology, an argument could be made there’s a high percentage of people living and working in the area who actually attended all their classes in school.

“There’s been a tremendous drop-off in new housing,” Solomon said. “The low-hanging fruit is gone, so you need to be looking at



Solomon says The Green Room grew out of customer demand and something of a perfect storm of market forces. PPS Photo.

the next level and it’s constantly working to find those opportunities and seizing them wherever you can. Find your customer’s needs and service them. You have to be prepared to shift.”

Solomon said the company has projected this year to be between three- and seven percent better, revenue-wise, than 2009. He said, as of mid-August, the company has a shot to achieve that goal.

“We pride ourselves on listening to our customers and helping them grow their businesses any way they can, and if that’s now through green and energy-efficient products, we’ll be right there. We appreciate the opportunity to earn their business in that respect,” Solomon said, cautioning that overplaying the eco-friendly, “green” hand could lead to unpleasant blowback.

“I don’t want the green movement to become something that every corner store’s glomming onto and sort of debasing. The reality of it is that, if people are trying to do the best they can for the environment and to conserve energy and other resources, then that’s the things that we need to be leading us here,” Solomon said. “The certifications and the education that are offered to that end? I don’t want to see the balance get shifted too much into a marketing thing. It’ll get trashed that way. We try to be genuine in that approach as best we can.” **RJ**