

Hardware store uses personal touch to compete

continued from page 8

We feel we have added value in our services that the big box stores don't offer. We have a great complement of personnel that are seasoned veterans in the building material business. We sell a large amount of custom orders and specialty products such as trusses and engineered wood, which differentiates us from the mass merchants.

We provide free plan take-off, job site visits, prompt delivery, and assist in owner-built homes. We also have excellent "old time" relationships with most of our vendors and they normally supply us with those special order items and hard to find materials very quickly.

Most small businesses competing with the larger chain stores cite superior customer service as how to remain successful. Besides customer service, how do you stay ahead of the big boys?

Many times, the perception is that the big box stores can beat us up on pricing, which, in many cases, is false. Our prices are competitive and with the other services we provide, the local customers will usually purchase from our stores.

Customers are loyal to their "hometown" lumber and hardware store. As a smaller company, we are able to gain repeat business by taking the time to make their project ours.

What do your workers have in terms of training and background, compared to those in other hardware stores? What do you do to enhance customer service skills of your employees?

Our personnel base consists largely of career-oriented industry professionals that have been in the lumber and hardware business for several years. An experienced sales and yard staff is vital to uphold our goals and objectives.

We have monthly product knowledge meetings for the salespeople as well as quarterly "all store" meetings for training.

We spend time and resources to cross train our personnel, so they can take advantage of promotional opportunities as we expand.

We promote our employees, versus hire from outside of our company. We have longevity in full-time personnel, with little turnover. Many employees have 10 years with the company.

Are you members of a cooperative or association? How does it effect you?

In the past, we were part of True Value. We spent seven years with the cooperative for our hardware purchases. As the association's cost increased, we evaluated the entire program and changed to a more regional supplier.

Our new supplier tailored a partnership that has worked well and kept us very competitive.

We work hand in hand with our vendors and create an environment where we are both able to be successful. Our five-store chain provides us with volume purchasing, thus keeping us priced right.

We are members of several industry associations, such as Master Builder's Association of Pierce County, National Lumber and Building Materials Association, Build-

ing Industry Association of Washington, and Western Building Materials Association. These fine organizations help us keep current in the lumber and building material business.

What sort of coalition of small businesses do you have supporting your business?

We purchase a variety of products from local suppliers - trusses, engineered wood products, hardware, concrete products and millwork, to name a few.

We support the local businesses regarding our needs in printing, advertising, maintenance and repair, signage, and equipment purchases. In turn, these local small businesses often support Arrow Lumber & Hardware.

Who is your key demographic? What does the Arrow customer look like?

Our customers range from homeowners to commercial contractors. Our customers have confidence in our ability to supply all their needs from minor plumbing repairs to additions, new homes, multi-family, industrial and commercial building projects.

You've obviously built relationships with local contractors, as well as commercial and industrial customers, to make your business viable. What would you recommend to another small business looking to establish similar relationships?

My best advice is to treat the customer as you would want to be treated during the shopping and purchasing experience; bond with the customers and help them with suggestions that may help in their projects.

Get involved in the communities and support local activities. **BE**