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The 'Go-To Guys'

Even competitors refer tough questions to southwest Florida's Brinker Brown

By **A.D. "Butch" Horn**
Editor

Fort Myers, FL — More than 20 years ago, when Jeff Brown cofounded Brinker Brown Fastener and Supply, he wanted to build a reputation for problem solving and exceptional service. He didn't know how soon he'd be tested or how far he'd come.

"What really put Brinker Brown on the map happened within the first 30 days of the business," Brown recalls. "One of the County Justice Center's walls delaminated (the facing fell off), and about 90 tons of debris fell on the sidewalk overnight. They came to us for a solution on how to properly refasten the walls.

"We needed to come up with a fastener that wouldn't corrode and one that had a large bearing surface. We took two different fasteners and married them together, actually creating a new anchor specifically for that project. And then we provided them with about 250,000 of them — they went around the entire building, covering a city block and five stories high, to make sure all the walls were reinforced.

"That was about 20 years ago and even with the hurricanes those walls are still standing. That pretty much established us as the 'go-to' guys in this area," he adds.

The list of similar situations where Brinker Brown has stepped in to solve a problem or save a project is lengthy and varied, and the organization has built on its slogan: No problems, just solutions.

"This approach has separated us from a lot of others, and we take pride in our ability to analyze and solve problems," Brown points out. "We are close to a group of engineers in this area, for example — regularly holding 'lunch and learn' sessions with them — and it isn't unusual for an engineer to call early on in



A framed news story reminds Jeff Brown of the event that put Brinker Brown on the map when it was just a fledgling company more than 20 years ago.



Big Orange is the company's Mobile Tool and Fastener

a project to ask what we would recommend."

Knowledgeable people lead the way

Behind the scenes, the organization is built upon a philosophy that well-trained, knowledgeable people are the foundation of success, and that translates to a serious, formal training program. Sales manager Tom Barklow is in charge of the expanding training program.

"We know that a well-trained salesperson who can talk to a customer in the field and not have to refer to sales literature, manuals or catalogs is a real asset," Barklow points out.

"All of our inside salespeople use the STAFDA Counter Pro program, and we've had a lot of positive feedback on it," he adds.

"Initially, they start with small packets of information, maybe basic fastener facts, or something on the latest technology. We like to be sure each is cross-trained on everything we do and that takes a while."

Formal training sessions take place two evenings a month, but Barklow is quick to point out that "training is a daily, on-going thing."

"And, once a new hire has been with us about five months, we send them to Powers Fasteners' school in New York for some advanced training," adds Brown.

"Our emphasis on training and education is one of the reasons we get the amount of walk-in business we do," Brown continues. "We expect our phones to be answered within two rings and every person through the door to be welcomed before they take more than a few steps. There's nothing worse than being ignored and we want customers to know they're welcome."

Ambitious 2006

Brinker Brown has an outside sales force of seven and an inside sales force of six and growing rapidly.

Within the next year, the organization will not only expand to a new headquarters building that's about triple the size of the original, but it will add a new branch store to mirror its 10,000-square-foot outlet in nearby Naples, FL.

The new headquarters will feature a 16,000-square-foot warehouse, an 8,000-square-foot showroom and more than 5,000 square feet dedicated to office operations — including a spacious training center.

"It's a bit of a scramble to get people ready to both staff our larger new headquarters and be ready to open the doors at the new branch in Port Charlotte (FL)," Brown points out. "We'll have at least twice as many inside salespeople here as well as a completely new staff in the new store — and we expect our salespeople to be completely up to speed when the doors open."

Command Center. Outfitted to give the impression of a construction SWAT team vehicle on the outside — complete with flashing orange lights — its a showroom, demo center and roving classroom on the inside. It regularly appears at special events, including educational outings at local schools.



Big Orange interior



Big Orange showroom



Warehouse manager Deb Park has her work cut out for her in the cramped headquarters building as inventory builds prior to the move into a more spacious new facility.

As Brown says, his branches aren't "twigs" so this is an ambitious growth spurt to be completed all in one year. The magnitude of the task is compounded by the challenge of finding good people. "In our area the housing market has taken off, but the service economy hasn't kept pace. That makes for a challenging, difficult environment to work in," he adds.

Spread the word

Competing in such a competitive environment puts a premium on name recognition, building a solid customer base and strong marketing.

When Brown bought out his partner, in 1995, he was able to refocus his energies on the new business plan. He brought in Bryan Cassell as general manager and Barklow as sales manager. At the same time the company took on the Muro line of tools — taking it from virtually no sales in Florida to a multimillion dollar line in about 10 years.

"A lot of things came together for us," Brown admits, "good timing and good people."

It was about this time that the company started putting more emphasis on its marketing and solidify its image. "We want to portray a truly professional image so people understand the Brinker Brown difference: quality-service-value," Brown adds.

A major investment came in the form of the company's truck fleet, or rolling billboards as the staff portrays them. "We don't do a lot of advertising so our trucks are the best billboards we can have," Brown explains. "We're sticklers for keeping them clean and looking good."

"We have people all the time asking us how many branches we have around the country — thinking we're a national company — because they see the trucks so often and they look so professional," adds Barklow.

There are 16 trucks in the fleet, but the flagship is "Big Orange." Big Orange is a panel truck that gives the impression of a SWAT vehicle — it's the Mobile Tool and Fastener Command Center — complete with flashing amber lights. Resplendent with all major vendor and association logos — including several Brinker Brown private label products — it attracts a lot of attention whether on a jobsite or taking part in a special event. "It's a work in progress," Brown confesses, "but it's been a lot of fun and has generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm. We're still fine-tuning the best way to use it."

Two other vehicles stand out as well. Both are Sprinters. Unique high-profile vans outfitted to carry a pallet-load of cargo and a mini-showroom of new products.



Juan Garay, left, and Jeff Brown share a brief break in the action during a typically busy day.



The Sprinter trucks are equipped with laptop computers

The Sprinters put Brinker Brown's jobsite specialists in position to provide customers with extensive service thanks to the installation of laptop computers with wireless access to the Internet. Connected via their local cellphone provider and using software from Integrated Systems Technology that's customized for the distribution industry, these vehicles not only have complete access to the World Wide Web, but drivers can log onto the Brinker Brown network.

"We started with Big Orange; the system has worked so well we're moving it into the others as fast as we can," Brown says. "The system allows access to e-mail, our inventory, credit, billing and account records for several thousand customers."

"With the laptop, I can do what used to take as many as five different people when I had to call in," adds site specialist D. J. Uman. "When I called in, somebody had to answer the phone and then shift me around to accounting, credit, the warehouse and maybe somebody in billing. The new technology streamlines everything and makes it much easier to serve the customer."

"Throughout our business we try to differentiate ourselves by going the extra mile and providing an additional level of value," Barklow says. "This is just one example of how we're doing that every day."

Investing in value

"Reinvesting in the business is another of the ways we stand out," Brown adds. "That includes inventory, technology, vehicles, facilities and people."

"For example, we have a lot of unique tools on the shelves, tools that might be considered "D" items. They might only turn once or twice a year, but we want to have them when a customer comes in and asks. More than once we've turned that ability to provide something uncommon into a long-standing relationship because we were able to save a customer time and money."

"We invest deep and wide in inventory. That might not always be the most economical thing, but it's been justified by the results. Sooner or later somebody will come in and ask for one of the longer, larger diameter bits, for example, and we'll land a new customer."

Building the business is an ongoing thing throughout the organization as Brown reminds his staff to look for deeper penetration with existing customers and to never overlook an opportunity.

"When you walk on a jobsite, you have multiple levels of opportunity from the people digging in the gravel all the way through a high-rise to the

offering wireless Internet connections, and they can carry a large load.



The company's 20/20 epoxy is the product that opened the door to the major bridge project in the background for jobsite specialist DJ Uman, left, and sales manager Tom Barklow.



"We like to have fun with our private labels," says Jeff Brown. Here, he shows off one of the company's labels on the door of Big Orange. The unique graphics are part of the branding that Brinker Brown has been so successful with.



people putting lightning protection on the roof," adds Barklow. "And we have a competitor trying to sell to everybody in between, too, but we have an abundance of products and an abundance of opportunities."

Not about price

"Sometimes we're perceived as being the most expensive," Brown continues. "But just because we have the most inventory, the most trucks and the most knowledgeable people doesn't mean we have the highest prices — value doesn't mean higher cost."

"We guarantee that we're not the most 'expensive' even if a product does cost more, because we bring value to the jobsite — expertise, repairs for everything we sell, a rental service if a customer needs it, and we stand behind everything we sell."

"Even at the 'big boxes' and everywhere around here people regularly answer a customer's questions by saying 'call Brinker Brown.' Even our competitors tell us that, in a pinch, they do the same thing — go down the street and ask for a specific fastener and they'll tell you to 'call Brinker Brown.' We are the go-to guys," Brown concludes.



The goal is to have the Brinker Brown name in every tool box and on every jobsite.

Brinker Brown Fastener & Supply Inc. at a Glance

Founded: 1985

Ownership: Privately owned

Management team: Jeff Brown, president; Bryan Cassell, general manager; Tom Barklow, sales manager; Steve Clayton, purchasing manager; Holly Benson, office manager; Deb Park, warehouse manager; Debbie Adams, Naples branch manager

Headquarters: 11351 Metro Parkway, Ft. Myers, FL 33912

Facilities: Current main facility = approximately 5,500 square feet of warehouse plus showroom and offices; Naples branch = approximately 11,000 square feet (Note: New headquarters slated to open in 2006 will include 8,000-square-foot showroom, 5,100 square feet of office and training space and 16,000 square feet of warehouse)

Markets: Residential, commercial and municipal construction

Lead lines: Muro, DeWalt, Makita, Powers Fasteners, PrimeSource Building Products, Hitachi, Diamond Products, Milwaukee Electric Tool, Rectorseal, Bostik, Ramset, Swan, Compass International, Porteous Fasteners, Filmtech, Buildex, M. K. Morse, Elco, Wright Tools, Maze Nails, PHD Manufacturing, The Vulcan Company, Aervoe Industries, Werner, S&S Pro, Bosch, Porter Cable, Metabo

Computer software: Integrated Systems Technology, Inc., Irving, TX

Associations/Affiliations: STAFDA, Sphere 1

Website: www.brinkerbrown.com

'We want our name in everybody's tool crib'

Brinker Brown started putting its own labels on packages to get additional name recognition and that has grown to a lengthy list of products sporting the Brinker Brown logo. Private labeling has opened doors and closed sales for the southwest Florida distributor.

"We started with diamond blades, diamond core bits and related products about 15 years ago," recalls president Jeff Brown. "That worked very well because we had some proprietary specs that we used. That industry is so competitive, having our own specs and label gave us an exclusive that has served us very, very well."

"We try to have some fun with it though, too," he adds, referring to the names given to some of the Brinker Brown products, such as its Paver Slayer blade. "We have t-shirts with the label graphics on it, too."

The private labels have worked in marketing and creating an image in the area, but the ability to provide unique, specialized products has been invaluable as well.

"Our 20/20 epoxy has been a solid performer for about five years. We've always worked closely with engineers and architects, and we've found that sometimes they would work with our specs only to turn the job over to somebody else. So we decided to private label products like this to make that decision much easier for the enduser. Now, when they need a product to those specs, and they have no doubt we can supply it, the decision is fairly simple. The 20/20 epoxy was one of the reasons we got a very large, complete job on a local bridge project (featured on the cover of this issue).

From these very specific tools to more common items like polyurethane foam, tape measures and nails, the labeling process has grown. Carbide bits for rotary hammers and hammer drills are one of the latest additions. "Again, we want our name in everybody's toolbox, and since we sell so many of these tools, it made sense," Brown says.

Where will it end? Brinker Brown prides itself on bringing new tools to market and providing its customers with exclusive, high-end products. With that in mind Brown and his staff are always looking for another way to put their logo in everybody's tool crib.

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