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## Former Contest Winner Reaps Rewards

By **John R. Hall** / Business Management Editor. E-mail him at [johnhall@achrnews.com](mailto:johnhall@achrnews.com).

Back in May 2001, *The News* introduced readers to Bowen Refrigeration, Heating & Cooling of Muskegon, Mich. The company was the winner of *The News*' "Do You Want to Grow Your Business?" contest. Owners Don and Jennifer Bowen had entered the contest hoping for a chance to increase business and boost profits with a little help from Ruth King, currently CEO of ProNetwork.TV Inc., an information company serving the HVAC and plumbing trades. As the winners of the contest, the Bowens received some one-on-one sessions with King as part of the package.

King recommended a stepped-up effort to sell residential and commercial service agreements as part of her expert advice. Other suggestions included adding new accounting and dispatching software.

Three years later, *The News* visited with the Bowens to gauge their progress and see how the company's business was faring.

One of the most obvious changes is the facelift that the company's building is currently undergoing. The company is in the process of remodeling and expanding the office and shop space. Don Bowen noted that a demographic study of Muskegon shows that his business is located on the third busiest street in town, so he never seriously considered giving up the favorable location.

According to Don Bowen, the residential/commercial/industrial service contractor is enjoying a steady growth in a competitive market.

### Service Contracts Still The Key

Don Bowen is the first to admit that he

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enjoys the service side of the business. When the need arises, he goes on service calls and loves every minute of it. That's one reason why he appreciates the importance of service agreements.

"Business in other places around us has dropped off, but we have stayed steady," he said. "It has a lot to do with our maintenance contracts — things that Ruth King discussed with us — and that has kept us busy. It has helped a lot between seasons. I was always interested in building a maintenance program, but I didn't know how to go about doing it. That was the biggest problem.

"Ruth gave us ideas and told us what kind of paperwork to use, and we did that. Jennifer takes care of the planned maintenance. She organizes it and makes contact with the customer, sending out renewal letters, etc."

Bowen noted the company's biggest challenge was to grow the commercial service maintenance business. Nonetheless, he is pleased with the results. "Our commercial service accounts have probably doubled in the last year," he said. "This includes some very big contracts."

Jennifer Bowen took the hunt for business software as a personal challenge, and she spent a great deal of time shopping for the right package.

"We have become more efficient thanks to our new Service Automation software," she said. "This has helped us track our technicians' time, arrange our planned maintenance accounts, and generate new billing.

"Purchasing this software was a very good move on our part. Their support is excellent and it has made us a better company. I think this was our best move to grow our business. We are able to see where we are at with profitability per technician. We track all of our extended warranties. It will run maps for us to give the guys directions on service calls. If a customer calls with a problem, we can look it up immediately without having to pull up a bunch of paper."

**Help From Rheem**

Bowen Refrigeration has been a Rheem dealer since 1998 and has steadily grown into one of the largest Rheem dealers in the state. Don Bowen noted that the company is the No. 1 seller of Rheem extended warranties in Michigan and one of the top sellers in the United States.



Don and Jennifer Bowen's business philosophy emphasizes controlled growth. Their company, Bowen Refrigeration, Heating & Cooling of Muskegon, Mich., won *The News*' "Do You Want to Grow Your Business?" contest in 2001.



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“Rheem’s warranty program is excellent,” Don Bowen stated. “The Protection Plus program is very fair; there are virtually no problems.”

Jennifer Bowen noted, “Extended warranties are a big selling feature for our customers, and it is how we get a lot of jobs. The customers are at ease because they know they are covered for parts and labor for 10 years.”

Rheem also provides excellent customer service, said Don Bowen. He keeps duplicates of the most common replacement parts, but he relies on Rheem’s twice-weekly deliveries to keep a minimum amount of equipment in stock. “If we need something right away, our Rheem distributor will throw it in their personal vehicle and get it here,” he said. “They are very good to work with.”

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**A Lift From Employees**

Another key factor in the company’s success has been the employees. The company has four service technicians, five installers, two salespeople, and a dispatcher. Jennifer Bowen serves as the office manager. All of them work very well together, she said.

“Our employees are phenomenal,” Jennifer Bowen said. “We have an awesome group of people. Our customers send so many letters and call us complimenting our employees, both the service techs and installers.”

Don Bowen added, “We have weekly meetings and go over issues and problems which are addressed right then. If they are doing a good job, we compliment them, too. It is a group effort. We ask them to do it and they do it. We have virtually no turnover in employees. We try to keep them all happy.”

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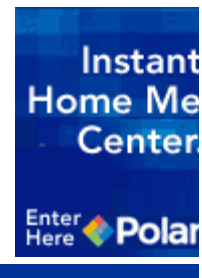
**Other Key Factors**

Service agreements, new business software, and dedicated employees top the list of reasons for Bowen’s continued success, but Jennifer Bowen also attributes her husband’s tight control of costs as another element in the equation.

“Don keeps a close eye on expenditures,” she said. “He has a finger on everything. Nothing is overbought and inventory is tight.

“We’ve seen local heating and cooling companies go out of business because owners have allowed someone else to do their purchasing, which resulted in overbuying, and they weren’t watching their costs. They didn’t realize they were going bankrupt until the very end.”

“I am the only person who orders the equipment — everything,” Don Bowen said. “My guys can buy parts for their trucks, but I control the buying by doing it myself.”



This philosophy is part of a business plan that emphasizes controlled growth. “We are not growing at leaps and bounds,” said Don Bowen. “We are growing at a controlled rate, which I believe is the key to our success. I do all of our commercial jobs because these are the ones you can really lose your heart on.

“I am on the jobsites from beginning to end. I set up everything. We set a complete rooftop change in an hour and a half because everything was done and ready to go. I had it all organized, which is a key component.”

Since winning the “Grow Your Business” contest, company revenues have increased 15 percent, which is the target set by the Bowens. Winning the contest “pushed us to take the extra steps,” said Jennifer Bowen. “We knew we had to get a new software system and begin planned maintenance and winning pushed us.”

“Winning the contest has definitely paid off,” Don Bowen concluded.

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