

Building trust: Friede's focus on relationships helps during tough times



Living past 100 is as rare for a company as it is for a human being, but those that accomplish this exceptional feat know that nothing worthwhile in life is earned through quick fixes or faddish short-term thinking.

They also know that relationships – either personal or business – are the sweet nectar of a life well lived.

While Roger Friede and Scott Truehl, partners in Reedsburg's Friede & Associates, are relative latecomers to a company that was founded in 1897 and is now in its fourth generation of family ownership, they know that community ties and sincere client relationships are more than just quaint throwbacks to another age – they're bona fide assets.

"Philosophically speaking, we chase clients, not jobs," said Truehl, executive vice president with Friede & Associates, which was recently awarded the special Building Commitments Award at the Wisconsin Family Business of the Year Awards ceremony. "We're trying to chase and introduce ourselves to people who may be repeat builders and take a longer-term approach to the construction market, as opposed to maybe some folks that are out there trying to cut corners and will chase a job and really don't care at the end of the job if they have a great relationship with a client.

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"When we look at our work that we do each and every year, a huge share of it is directly and indirectly the result of the work that we put in place in the past. It's the referral business, it's the existing clients building a second, third, fourth time. In some ways, it's back to this family long-term kind of approach. We intend to be in business for a long time, so if we run into an issue on a job, we're going to take care of it, protect the name of the company and the reputation that has been developed over 100-some years."

The company actually claims *continuous* operation for around 67 years. During World War II, founder William Friede's four sons, who had taken over the company, all joined the armed services and temporarily suspended operation. After returning, they decided to focus on commercial construction, which has been Friede's bailiwick ever since.

In 1953, Roger Friede Sr., the father of current president Roger Friede, purchased the company, and in the early '90s, Roger Jr. took the reins. In 1998, Truehl came on board as a partner, and the name was changed from Friede Brothers to Friede & Associates.

Naturally, in all that time, there were plenty of opportunities to build a store of goodwill in the community and across the state, and those valuable ties helped the firm weather the severe building downturn that marked the Great Recession.

“Certainly our activities slowed down as the economy slowed, but we were lucky to have some strong relationships with customers that have continued to do some projects, and we’ve pursued some opportunities that a number of years we probably wouldn’t have,” said Friede. “For example, a client that we’ve done a number of jobs for in the Wisconsin Dells area had acquired a hotel in Minneapolis and asked if we would like to come up and do some work for them on that project. And a few years ago we would have thanked them and tried to put them in contact with someone in Minneapolis, but we’ve gone up there and done two significant projects for them, and that’s worked out for us. ... All of those opportunities are the direct result of ongoing relationships that we’ve had with our clients.”

LEEDing the pack

While Friede & Associates’ longevity and the loyalty it’s built up are among the company’s greatest assets, it is far from a dinosaur when it comes to construction trends.

As a lover of the outdoors, Roger Friede has taken his personal interests into the professional realm, positioning Friede & Associates as a leader in LEED certification. Several of the company’s staff members have become LEED professionals, and more training is ongoing in order to deepen the company’s understanding of LEED construction.

In fact, Friede & Associates constructed the new Culver’s in Baraboo, which was one of the first restaurants in the state to earn LEED certification.

“This is a facility that is owned by [Culver’s CEO] Craig Culver and one of his partners,” said Friede. “It’s a store that Craig has been committed to [making] a LEED [building]. And we worked pretty much from the onset with the conception of this store with their in-house architect to look at where we could get points for the project and where money was best spent to get the biggest savings and biggest point value through the LEED process.”

While Friede is taking his company into the next generation with his focus on LEED training and environmental awareness, these relatively new building methods are actually a nod to the company’s core philosophy. Sustainability, after all, is a necessary precursor to longevity.

“About 85% of the work that we do are negotiated projects where we’re working with the client to do the design-build process and guide them through,” said Truehl. “As part of that, we have adopted the attitude of helping the client understand life cycle cost and making other choices and realizing that cutting corners in construction today perhaps has longer-term impacts for them. And so it’s definitely part of our mental DNA here, working with our clients, in having them look at long-term effects of the building or the quality, the fact that they’re making an investment in something that’s going to last 40, 50, or maybe 100 years.”

A happy surprise

While the Friede name has stood for stability throughout the years, Friede & Associates is something of a close-knit extended family as well – regardless of the *biological* DNA of its workers.

Two of the company’s employees nominated Friede & Associates for the Family Business Award as a way of giving back to their employer and recognizing Roger Friede for his leadership.

One condition of the nomination, however, was that it remain a surprise. So when the awards banquet neared, Truehl asked Friede if he wanted to attend, showing him a nominee list that had been edited to exclude Friede & Associates.

“And the fun thing for me was, on top of it, Roger didn’t really realize until he looked at the program [that we were nominated],” said Truehl. “As we sat down for dinner, we managed to keep him away from some of the print material. ... And then lo and behold, the very first award that came down the pike was ours, and he had the great fortune of being able to go up and accept it.”

As for Roger’s reaction? Pride, naturally – and just a little bit of terror.

“I was quite proud that the people here had gone through the hoops to make the application, and so there was a great sense of pride there,” said Friede. “But I think that was quickly followed up by a sense of panic when they read our name. I certainly had nothing prepared in the way of talking points or a speech to give. It was both exciting and a bit frightful.”

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