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J & K Sales Associates Invests in its Customers



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Providing value

J and K Sales invests in its customers

BY MARY JO MARTIN
Editorial director

Karl Grabowski has always believed in reinvesting in J and K Sales, the 31-year-old rep agency that he owns in Manchester, N.H. Over the years, he has put a great deal of emphasis on using electronic technology to streamline the business. Their 27,000-square-foot facility includes office space for the agency's 23 full-time employees, and a fully racked warehouse that stocks a significant amount of product.

J and K's product mix is divided into three main areas — each of which is responsible for about a third of the business:

- Residential and light commercial plumbing and heating specialties
- Industrial plastic piping products
- Hydronic heating.

The business is split fairly evenly between residential/commercial and industrial, and serves applications including plumbing, hydronic heating, industrial plastics, turf, irrigation, fire protection and water works.

Grabowski and his team recently hosted me at J and K's facility in Manchester, where I learned more about the agency and toured their new training lab. Following is my interview with them.

MJM: What are some of the more unique aspects of your agency?

Grabowski: We employ a very unique agency-developed and designed IT Communication platform that has allowed our business to become virtually paperless over the last 10 years. Our fully racked warehouse

with 30-foot clear ceiling spans utilizes state-of-the-art technology including laser-guided Raymond Lifts. In 2004, we added a complete 35-seat Training Classroom that is in constant use by our wholesalers and contracting customers. And in 2012, we were proud to have opened a state-of-the-art Live Fire Training Lab for our Hydronic Heating Product Lines.

MJM: You've built a very experienced team here at J and K. Please share with us the valuable expertise they offer and how they support your

responsibilities. Chris, Jeff and I spend a significant portion of our work week on the "road" calling on wholesalers, contractors and engineers.

Our Inside Group includes:

- 3 Person Customer Service Team
- 2 Person Technical Service Team
- 1 Person Sales Ad-Min Coordinator
- 3 Person Back Office Accounting Team



A 1000-square-foot Hydronic Heating Training Center features a "Live Fire" lab, with Baxi Gas Fired Condensing Wall Hung Boilers, Eternal Hybrid Condensing Wall Hung Water Heaters, Paw Modular Zone Control Systems along with Legend Valve Versa-Therm and QuickTherm Flooring systems and manifolds.

customers?

Grabowski: In addition to me as president, our management team includes sales manager Chris Dewitt, technical service manager Jeff Young and operations manager Helen Degli-Angeli. Along with their management



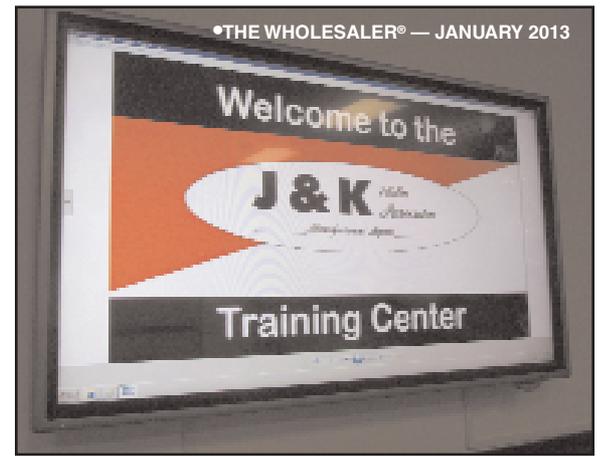
Among the members of the J and K team who are taking great pride in the new training facility are (from left): Jeff Young, Ken Lajoie, Jason Lamb and Helen Degli-Angeli.

- 3 Person Warehouse Team.
- Our Outside Group is comprised of:
- 5 Person Outside Sales Team
 - 2 Person Outside Technical Support Team.

One of the things that we do differently from most rep firms is that the Technical Service Side of our business is leading the charge on our technologically advanced product lines. In many rep firms, outside salespeople lead the charge on these types of products. In our business, we have hired gifted contractor installers that have solid backgrounds in hydronic heating. Our belief is that contractors teaching contractors is a better way to go than salesmen teaching contractors.

MJM: Talk about the emphasis that J and K places on training, and why is this important?

Grabowski: Training and contractor support is the key to everything. In our current economic climate, our wholesaler customers do not want to



carry the inventory that they have in their own buildings — never mind what we would like to sell them. The absolute only way we can drive the acceptance of our product lines with distribution is to create identity of our product lines with contractors and specifications with engineers through training.

Performed correctly, there is a tremendous level of "Enlightened Self Interest" that is created with a high commitment to secondary market training and support at the rep level. In performing this function well, it is possible to change

"Our belief is that contractors teaching contractors is a better way to go than salesmen teaching contractors."

the relationships with channel partners — from reps attempting to be salespeople trying to "sell" our products to buyers, to reps evolving into "teachers" educating our customers as students. Reps that are committed to this effort tend to make themselves invaluable with the manufacturers we represent and the wholesalers we serve.

MJM: You recently made quite an investment, opening this great hands-on training lab. Please describe it in detail for our readers.

Young: J and K Sales represents



products in the industrial plastics and hydronic heating industry that that have a high level of technological sophistication.

(Turn to Customer... page 54.)

Customer training key to J and K sales strategy

(Continued from page 52.)

Our most recent investment in training and support is a 1000-square-foot Hydronic Heating Training Center with featuring a “Live Fire” lab. We feature Baxi Gas Fired Condensing Wall Hung Boilers, Eternal Hybrid Condensing Wall Hung Water Heaters, Paw Modular Zone Control Systems along with Legend Valve Versa-Therm and QuickTherm Flooring systems and Manifolds.

We wanted the ability to train on these product lines in a “Live Fire” Environment. Incorporated into the functionality of the Lab is an ability to “screw up” all our equipment and put our contractors in a real world trouble shooting educational environment.



A 17-foot V Nosed Trailer outfitted with J and K's equipment product lines is detailed at right. This trailer is used at local industry trade shows, distributor open houses and at larger contractor facility training events. Also, J and K has outfitted a pair of Ford Transit Vans for itsr outside techs. These vans are Live Fire Capable and are used in day-to-day training, start-up support and after-the-sale service calls in New England and Upstate New York.

MJM: What was involved in building this new training room when it came to design, construction and time?

Young: It was two years of hell — just kidding! We are extremely proud of the fact that 90% of both the design work and the actual construction of our Lab was performed by agency employees.

We did have to hire some outside contracting on the gas line welding,



QuickTherm Flooring systems and Manifolds are part of the Hydronic Heating Training Center.

water service into the facility, electrical and tile work. We did receive some design support from both Marathon/Baxi on piping system design and with Paw on control systems. We are very grateful to Marathon Baxi, Eternal, Paw and Legend Hydronics for their contribution in equipment, materials and design support on this project. This undertaking would not have been possible without their support.

MJM: How often are you holding classes?

Young: Our classes are being set up weekly, with the goal to perform multiple classes each week. We are attempting to schedule as many training classes as possible as we believe

that there is a pure math formula relationship between trainings conducted and contractors committed to the products that they have been trained on.

The structure of the training class is dependant on the educational level of the attendees involved. These classes can be segmented by product line from basic introductory training to advanced training classes.

We have the option of half-day training, full-day training and, even in some cases, multiple days of training involving overnight hotel stays.

MJM: What is the approximate class size and who conducts the sessions?

Young: In our training center, we can hold classes for up to 35 contractors. Our Live Fire Lab will comfortably handle a group of eight to 10 contractors at a time.

Both our inside and outside techs are completely qualified to conduct several levels of product line training. These classes are segmented from basic introductory training classes to advanced training classes depending of the product line involved.

We also offer these facilities to the

manufacturers that we represent, along with our distributor partners and local contractor associations on an as needed basis.

MJM: Do you provide any certifications?

Young: We currently offer Gas License Continuing Education Hours for contractors who need hours per their requirements for a Gas License.

We are currently working on a program to offer CEU credits for engineers that will be finalized over the next few months.

MJM: Do you charge for these programs?

Young: At the present time, we do not charge for any training, either at our facility or in the field by our outside techs.

In addition to offering no-cost training in our Training Center and at contractor locations or job sites, our agency offers a “Start Up “ Service at



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no cost to the contractor. This involves on site Tech Support at start up to any and all contractors that install any of our condensing Baxi Boilers and/or Eternal Water Heaters for the first time. We believe that we are the only rep firm in this market that is offering this service.

MJM: What has been some of the feedback you've been getting?

Young: The feedback has been tremendous to our new Lab. The universal comments that we have received is that until now there had been no place that any contractor can go for actual real world product training on



“Our fully racked warehouse with 30-foot clear ceiling spans utilizes state-of-the-art technology including laser-guided Raymond Lifts.”

Condensing Equipment Product Lines in our area.

MJM: You also have a mobile vehicle that can go to customer locations for training. Talk about what is offered in the mobile training and how it is handled?

Young: In addition to our Training Center and Live Fire Lab, J and K Sales has invested in a 17-foot V Nosed Trailer outfitted with our equipment product lines. This trailer is used at local industry trade shows, distributor open houses and at larger contractor facility training events.

In Addition, earlier this year our agency invested in a pair of Ford Transit Vans for our outside techs. These vans are Live Fire Capable and are used in day-to-day training, start-up support and after-the-sale service calls in New England and Upstate New York. n

For additional information, visit www.jandksales.com.



J and K's training center can hold classes for up to 35 contractors, and its Live Fire Lab will comfortably handle a group of eight to 10 contractors at a time. Inside and outside techs are completely qualified to conduct several levels of product line training.

This We Believe

- **In a single-minded commitment to continuously identify the worst aspects of our business and endlessly strive to turn these weaknesses into our strengths.**
- **In the understanding that excellence is defined totally by what our customers say it is.**
- **In despising and opposing bureaucracy and all the mindless barriers that are erected as a result of it.**
- **In striving to attract, retain, motivate and most importantly, train, train and then train some more, the best people we can find in our industry.**
- **In setting ourselves apart by being more focused on our customers than our competitors.**
- **In selecting our product lines on the basis of strong technical, mechanical and competitive advantages.**
- **In continuously promoting our product lines in the secondary market to create contractor demand and engineering specifications for our customers and our principals.**
- **In the knowledge that profit is a natural growth of doing things right.**