

# Staying Afloat in a Sinking Economy

By John Vastyan  
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**A**re we in a recession? We can't say the jury's out any longer. But the tough times aren't affecting everyone. So, how is it that some contractors are up-ticking in the downturn; hiring, not firing?

One simple word comes to mind: positioning. Any contractor who has positioned him or herself for success — and whose business is stable and profitable today — has likely been hard at it for years.

The pros who stay out front in good times and bad are deliberate, focused, and attentive to new technology and market shifts. They network, build relationships, and are willing to take calculated risks — even at a time when the world slides toward commodity pricing. They grip the wheel and stay the course. They stick to the “quality first” standard on which they've built their businesses.



Higher margin, the use of better mechanical equipment, and customers known to pay on time factor into whether or not Rob Weinfurter will shoulder a hydronics project.

**Two masters of positioning are using their reputation for providing high-quality hydronic systems to help them weather tough times.**

They also have the right business mix. In very different geographical regions, two hydronics contractors shared with *Contracting Business* how their business is helping them prosper in a lean economy.

Rob Weinfurter runs All Seasons Plumbing & Heating in Homer, AK, a nine-year-old, three-man shop dedicated almost exclusively to hydronics.

“I’m buried,” Weinfurter says. “We can’t keep up with demand here. Business is soaring. In fact, although we’re not immune to the recession, things haven’t slowed down here for us at all.”

Weinfurter credits the decision to focus on quality hydronic systems for his company’s ability to hang tough during tough times. “We set a course years ago to mark our work uniquely,” he adds. “Higher quality is the ‘brand,’ and our rates have migrated to the upper end of the scale so we’re compensated accordingly. The approach has worked well: I realized not long ago that there’s as much work for us as we want to take on.”

Looking back on the first three or four years of his business, Weinfurter recalls the long hours, and the times he had to give a bit of it back to the customer while refining his approach, improving skills, or learning new installation techniques. No doubt that was time well spent.

Another realization that came to Weinfurter recently was



Rob Weinfurter’s hydronics business is off the charts. He remained patient as he grew the business carefully, and focused on high-end projects.

that he could afford to be more discriminating in the type of work he'd do, and in choosing the customers he'd work for. Higher margin jobs, the use of better mechanical equipment, and customers known to pay on time all now factor into his decision about the work his company will commit to.

"Today, we're more profitable than ever before and we typically get the type of work we seek out," he continued. "I rarely take on work because we need cash flow. We avoid new construction work unless it's for custom builders and involves a quality hydronics installation."

Visiting a mechanical room completed by All Seasons is like stepping into a mechanical gallery. Weinfurter incorporates all the newest hydronics gear and connects it artfully. He has a passion for top-end technology, such as modulating-condensing boilers with controlled mixing and outdoor reset. On the domestic water side, it's high-efficiency indirect units with hot water recirculation.

### 100 Years Old and Still Learning

More than 3,000 miles away from Weinfurter's shop in Alaska, a similar tale of success is told by Dave Yates, 56, owner of F.W. Behler, Inc., York, PA. F.W. Behler is a 109-year old, full-service HVAC, plumbing and mechanical contracting firm with 14 employees. Yates is driven by a passion for challenging commercial and residential hydronics, work that now often



Dave Yates is driven by a passion for challenging commercial and residential hydronics, work that often connects to geothermal and solar technology projects.

connects to geothermal and solar technology, too.

For both Weinfurter and Yates, positioning has been intuitive and planned. "To borrow an old ad slogan, 'Quality goes in before the name goes on,'" says Yates. "I really hadn't known how different we were in our area of operation until we were asked, time and time again, to repair the work of other firms."

Yates was a psychology major in college, with a keen fascination for the way things are put together. For eight years he's been the plumbing columnist for **Contractor** magazine. He also writes for *Consumers Digest* and *Fine Homebuilding*, among other publications. He serves on the board of the Radiant Panel Association and is routinely sought out

as a trade show instructor.

Yates is building relationships at every turn, and a reputation for stellar work. However, many contractors have seen that a good reputation isn't always automatically a beacon for business. Yates and F.W. Behler must work to build the type of business relationships that they seek. Nine of 10 builders won't call Weinfurter or Yates; their work is too costly. The homeowner shopping for the cheapest furnace installation isn't their customer, either.

This is once again where a focus on high-quality hydron-



ics systems can help set a company apart from the low-price crowd.

"I know that I'll pay more for Dave Yates and his crew to do the work." Says a Yates customer. "I don't have money to throw away, but I know that the system we're doing — one that integrates geothermal with complex hydronics, injection mixing and multiple outdoor resets, HVAC and solar — requires the mind and talents of professionals. These professionals are capable mechanically, and take personal interest in designing and building a uniquely capable system. I know many of the contractors in this area. There's no doubt that Yates' firm is the only one with the competence to pull this off."

Positioning made it happen. By focusing on quality hydronics, Yates has placed himself in the forefront of that customer's mind. The customer refuses to look beyond it, because the brand is top-of-mind. Yet, it didn't happen overnight.

"We've been torching those irons for years," Yates says, with the realization that even with many years in business, there's always more to be learned.

If you're not heating those irons with hydronics, it might be time to start. 

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