

Making the best of a tough situation is nothing foreign to Randy Seaman, president of Seaman's Air Conditioning & Refrigeration in Grand Rapids, Mich.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, Randy Seaman and a friend emergency-landed a WWII era biplane in Pennsylvania after the engine threw a rod. The two had quite an adventure "air hitch-hiking" between small airports all the way back to Michigan. Unlike that 10-hour trip home, however, the current economic downturn has proven to be anything but brief.

Randy's father, Donald Seaman, started the contracting firm in Grand Rapids, Mich., in 1961, retiring 25 years later. The location and focus haven't changed; Seaman's Air Conditioning & Refrigeration installs, services and repairs HVACR systems for commercial and industrial clients in the Grand Rapids area.

What has changed at Seaman's, www.seamansac.com, is the type of work the company is doing on a regular basis, much of it fueled by tough economic times.

"Some people say there was enough business in 2008 to flywheel into 2009, but in 2010 ... it's getting real," says Randy.

Some competitors have folded. Many of them, says Seaman, were heavily invested in new construction where margins are low or, if they were undercapitalized, they're now in trouble.

"We've seen it all here on our home turf," adds Seaman. "Fortunately the adjustments we made brought stability and success to our firm and we're very thankful for that."

Cultural shift

Seaman's started as a service company, later moving into add-on and retrofit work. About 15 years ago, Seaman's sought out new construction work while still maintaining strength in service and retrofit. Preferring to avoid bid-and-spec jobs, the company hired professionals whose focus was



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Pictured left to right: Rick Walker, Patti VanKuiken, Randy Seaman and Dave Galbreath.



Seaman's favored Taco and Victaulic technology for a cooling tower pump loop station.

design/build work.

During the boom years of the 1990s and into 2005, the firm did well in the new construction market. With the slipping economy, however, Seaman's relaxed its preference for design/build to permit more bid-and-spec work, in an attempt to make it more competitive for the work that was available.

One of Seaman's secrets to success has been that, over the years, Randy and the management team have grown the firm deliberately and conservatively, reinvesting profits in the firm and the building.

"This has been a real source of stability for us," says Patti VanKuiken, assistant general manager. "With real attention to that, we've been able to ride out the tough economy."

Another valuable decision was to reinvigorate service and replacement work, a proactive shift that Seaman says has been hugely beneficial.

"Reconfiguring the business was a smart move," Seaman says.

"We're working to build a sales arm to match our professionalism in service and installation," continues Seaman. "Rick Walker, our director of business development, has been working closely with the sales and engineering team on this."

While the service department has pretty much held its own, the new emphasis is on end-users and building owners. This has also become the entrée to introducing building owners to the influence of advanced energy management and controls, much of it spurred by tax rebates.

For Seaman's customers, energy conservation is making a big impact now.

"Our forceful move into the 'green realm' has — to a great extent — kept us going," explains Seaman. "Though last year was horrible for our local economy, the responses to changes we've made have been very encouraging. Today, we're optimistic."

Big on green

National media have referred to Grand Rapids as America's greenest city. The second largest city in Michigan, it boasts the highest number of LEED certified buildings per capita, nation-wide. In 2005, Mayor George Heartwell pledged that more than 20% of the city's power would come from renewable sources by 2008. When the city met that challenge early, Heartwell raised the bar to 100% by 2020.

That makes Grand Rapids the ideal environment for Seaman's to explore all things green while strongly influencing recent projects. Seaman's has taken on some ambitiously green installations:

- At the Thousand Oaks Golf Course, a new banquet hall was built to LEED specification. Seaman's used 54 300-ft. vertical wells for geo-exchange and installed mechanical systems that supply domestic hot water, space heating and cooling for new and retrofitted portions of the facility. A mod-con boiler supplies supplemental hot water. The existing, high-temperature perimeter heating system is still in place to compensate for the large amount of window space. Incorporated into the system are web-based controls to help manage ever-shifting guest schedules. Seaman's also worked closely with the customer to carefully document data to win tax credits.
- In Grand Rapids, Seaman's took on mechanical systems installations for the 63rd District Court's new LEED registered 40,000-sq.ft. building. Here, too, geothermal filled the bill. Forty-five wells at 300-ft. each supply 40 commercial water-to-air units with ERVs. Vertical loop-fed geo-exchange energy entirely heats and cools the building. The geothermal brine solution is 25% propylene glycol with 707-gal. of



The engineering staff discusses a large mechanical system in progress.

concentrate to support the total system exterior capacity of 2,827-gal. Seaman's technicians also added 200-gal. of concentrate to support the building's interior volume of 800-gal. Indoor equipment includes 40 water-to-air heat pumps located in closets and above ceilings. Inside the mechanical room, Seaman's used two base-mounted Taco loop pumps with variable frequency drives. Each of the 15-hp pumps is rated at 316-gpm at 85-ft. head. Also, there are two 4-in. flanged Taco suction diffusers with start-up strainers built into the heat pump loops; smaller Taco pumps for building circulation; and two 4-in., flanged Taco multi-purpose valves; air vents, air separator and a 79-gal. ASME expansion tank. A Liebert computer room air conditioning system provides supplemental

cooling. Additional heat for four, 1,200-sq.ft. radiantly heated entry areas is provided by a small mod-con boiler.

- For the first Presbyterian Church in Hastings, Mich., Seaman's crews installed eight zones of Watts Radiant low-temperature radiant floor heat to provide winter comfort to 10,000-sq.ft. of interior space. They used 1/2-in. RadiantPEX tubing and eight custom manifolds with trunk isolation valves to feed eight zones of floor heat fed through four HydroControl pump-mounted mixing units. The HydroControl panels also feed heat to 8,400 lineal feet of 5/8-in. RadiantPEX tubing to warm 3,700-sq.ft. of snowmelt area outside.
- There's also a 13,000-sq.ft. home under construction in nearby Ada, Mich. "We rarely look at residen-

tial jobs, but this one was on a commercial scale," says Seaman. One mod-con boiler supplies heat to all levels of the home, while two more heat 14,000-sq.ft. of insulated, snow-melted driveway and walkway areas, even when temps dip toward the design temperature of 10°F. Carrier high-efficiency furnaces provide back-up heat. They also installed state-of-the-art Hon-

eywell steam humidification and web-based system controls.

- Three former American Seating Co. factory buildings were reincarnated into mixed-use space. The four-story buildings now have offices on the ground level and three stories of high-end apartments and condos above. The buildings include approximately 230,000-sq.ft. of residential space and over 100,000-sq.



Dave Henny, Seaman's service technician, performs a commissioning inspection.

ft. of commercial/retail space. Seaman's tackled the design/build job with 200+ ClimateMaster water-source heat pumps. A pair of Taco 900-gpm base-mounted pumps provides circulation for the closed loop.

- When the former Grand Rapids high school building was converted into 206 luxury apartments, Seaman's was called in to build the mechanical system. Each living unit includes a water-source heat pump to provide year-round comfort. Two 1.5 million Btuh Laars Rheos boilers provide additional heat to the building's heat pump loop during winter months; 10 ERVs meet the need for ventilation air.

Inside team has what it takes

During the last decade, Seaman's has received numerous Air Conditioning Contractors of America and other awards, among them inclusion in West Michigan's "101 Best & Brightest Companies to Work For," seven years in a row.

"Following Don's lead, Randy knew that to grow, we'd need to hire the best associates in the industry," says VanKuiken. "They stay because the work is challenging, there are strong personal and professional rewards, and they can make valuable contributions in every facet of company operations."

A defining note for Seaman's is Randy's vision statement, one everyone

has connected with on many levels: "Operate a company that others can see as being high quality, professional, honest, full of integrity, and always willing to do what is right for the customer."

To abide by and keep in step with that, Seaman relies routinely on his key management team of VanKuiken; Dave Galbreath, director of operations; and Walker, the director of business development.

"I couldn't begin to operate this company without their input, insights, counsel, understanding and friendship," Seaman says.

When a new job makes the transition from paper to finely tuned mechanical equipment, the same people see it through until the end. The management team for any given project is comprised of the same people that estimate and engineer it. This allows the team to hit the ground running with no loss of time.

"We like the continuity of this," says Seaman.

With a staff of 35, Seaman's has moved deliberately to build and maintain an in-house staff of three engineers: C.J. Fox started with Seaman's in 2002 and is now LEED accredited. Scott Hoogewind began work at Seaman's in 2006 and is an expert on energy rebates and tax credits. Mahlon Fredrickson specializes in geothermal systems and design; he began his career at Seaman's in 2001.



Technicians install Watts Radiant tubing for sidewalk snowmelt at a medical building.

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The Seaman's "family" is made up of high-quality, professional and honest associates.

Home and family

Randy's training began in his early years. Washing trucks, cleaning air filters, gophering tools and following Don around at jobsites were childhood tasks.

"My Dad farmed in his spare time," explains Seaman, so Randy's early work fixing tractors helped to develop his mechanical skills.

Seaman graduated from Ferris State University in 1973, a school known to have one of the nation's best HVACR programs. Five years after graduation, Seaman achieved journeyman status at the United Association Pipefitter's Local 70. He later acquired design and sales experience, eventually moving into management at a time when his father was considering retirement. When that happened, Randy became president of the company. His sister, Shirley, and brother-in-law Patrick Murphy are also part owners. Murphy is sales account manager and the "wearer of many other hats," says Seaman.

In the next generation, Kimberly (25-years-old) and Jacob Seaman (21-years-old) share their father's interests and alma mater. Kim completed her bachelor's degree at Ferris State in 2007. While there, she studied business administration and human resources. She also took elective classes in HVAC and after graduation she jumped at an opportunity to work in the office. Jacob is in his third year at Ferris State, concentrating on product engineering. Jake has helped occasionally with jobsite installations.

Loyalty to suppliers, manufacturers

"We're loyal to our suppliers and the manufacturers who've stood behind us through the years," says Seaman. "We're glad to have Watts Radiant as the supplier of choice for hydronic control panels, manifolds and radiant tubing, both PEX and the EPDM rubber, Onix. It's added nicely to the options we can offer our customers."

"We also install Bradford White water heaters, favoring them because of their reputation for reliability, and Laars boilers whose product line has grown considerably over the past couple of years," continues Seaman.

"We also use Watts valves and backflow assemblies, and Taco pumps," he adds. "We have excellent results with Taco every time."

"For geothermal and commercial water-source heat pump applications, we've used ClimateMaster equipment," says Seaman. "On one project, we used more than 100 of their heat pumps, a decision that offered the building owner year-round heating and cooling at extremely high efficiencies, saving a substantial amount of money on annual operating costs."

Passion for the craft

Seaman's passion to be the best in the industry is rivaled only by his interest in light aircraft. He's owned six airplanes throughout his life, starting with a 1941 Taylorcraft and now an Avid Magnum.

"For me, airplanes are a lot like flipping houses," says Seaman. "With a little sweat equity, you can turn them over for a bigger, faster model and have a whole lot of fun in the process, although not in this economy."

Randy and his wife of 32 years, Peggy, have taken Kim and Jake on many airborne camping trips. Among many other places, they've flown on vacation to remote areas in Montana, Florida and New York's Adirondack Mountains.


His previous plane was a Cessna 185, which he flew to Anchorage, Alaska, when it was time to sell it. His current aircraft has snow skis for the winter, and floats for the summer.

"Having floats on a plane opens a lot of doors since you are no longer limited to landing on airstrips," says Seaman. "It's not even an option."

Once, on a whim, he and a friend flew to Maine and back for a bushel of lobster.

But running the business, clearly, hasn't been a spur-of-the-moment affair.

"We work hard to successfully maintain all aspects of company operations, focusing especially on whatever it takes to maintain customer satisfaction," concludes Seaman.

"Apart from the logo on our trucks, we don't advertise. All new business comes through referral. Our bids may be higher, but our reputation is often the deciding factor. We aren't willing to sacrifice top-notch workmanship to shave a few dollars. If we have a 'key to success,' that's about as close as we'll get to naming it." 

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