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The Zen Of Contractor Relations

John Vastyan

In a popular 70s book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the author dives deeply into his love of life, and motorcycles. Life, like machines, needs maintenance. Relationships, too, need a good, seasonal lubricating.

And so it is that one of the Northeast's wholesale giants, Burlington, Mass.-based F. W. Webb, inaugurated its "Webb Expo" in 1993. Its purpose, according to John Provencal, Webb's vice president of plumbing and heating sales, was to "provide a forum for educating professionals in the plumbing and heating business, to allow interaction with suppliers, and for F.W.Webb to enhance customer relationships." And, with 60 branches and growing, Webb has a lot of customers to cater to.

On May 2, despite some ugly snow showers in Barre, Vt., hydronic Zen Master Dan Holohan captivated hundreds of listeners at this year's Webb Expo with his singular storytelling style. Holohan's keynote presentation before a packed auditorium drew laughter, questions and applause from self-professed "Holohan junkies" and uninitiated alike. There were even architects and builders, assured that if they wanted an expert's perspective of state-of-the-art hydronics and radiant heat, this was the place to be.

Holohan drew them in with stories. He enticed and instructed. Chiefly, he spoke with passion and personal experience about the comfort and phenomenon of radiant heat. And even a Zen message: "To understand the elegant simplicity of radiant, you've got to think like - no, be - the water. Imagine yourself coursing through the pipe," he taunted his audience, coaxing understanding and laughter.

Stomachs began to growl toward the end of the 11-to-1 presentation when Holohan referred to the many deep-fried turkeys, now a lunch tradition at the Webb Expo. Tempted as they were to dash for the turkey tent, every attendee stayed with him, through to completion. Holohan then unleashed the crowd, drawn like a wave toward the food and vast supplier expo, complete with special show pricing from the 125 suppliers, all exhibiting in the main arena and many attached tents and display trailers.

Rich Stocker, president of Stocker Plumbing and Heating, Inc., Chester, Vt., brought his son Jason into the business in 1993, the year of the first Expo. "We haven't missed a year, and with Holohan here this year, it's an added bonus to what's already a great event," he said. "We do a good bit of radiant heat work, so we really appreciate his perspective. Holohan's a great source of expertise and new ideas." He and Jason introduced themselves to Holohan, beckoning a quick snapshot. One for the Wall.

Steve Pulling, inside sales for Webb's Rutland, Vt., branch, was in high demand. A fixture at Webb since '77, and popular trouble-shooter who knows more than a thing or two about radiant heat, he and several of his comrades at Webb, including Nick Markowski, Randy McGuire, and Bill Czarnecki, bantered back and forth loudly in the turkey tent as customers placed orders in a raucous clamor, and once in unison, for "More Fried Turkey!" Customers, reps and friends (clearly, the operative word here) moved in hungrily as the turkeys were prepared by Steve and the Turkey Crew. An entire vanload of Butterball birds was delivered hours before the event, with four oil-filled fryers frothing away at full tilt.

A frequently asked question: How long's it take? Three and a half minutes a pound, about twice the time it took to strike up a great deal on the show floor.

In total, about 1,400 contractors and some family members came and went during the day. "Today, the Expo may be the largest buying P-H-C event in New England," said Provencal. Attendee registration attested to the claim. Professionals had come from all over Vermont, New York, and New Hampshire.

"Back in '93, when we pushed for the Expo initially, the only condition that Webb corporate placed was that this would be a Vermont Expo and that all locations needed to be included, and encouraged to participate," added Provencal. "Planning now begins each year in January. All employees have input, and the event just gets better year after year."

John Pope, chief executive officer, F. W. Webb, said, "The Expo is great for the contractors, suppliers, rep firms, and for Webb. It meets so many needs effectively, all in one event." He explained that, based on this model, they've replicated the Expo in Saratoga, N.Y., each fall, and have also held events in Maine. Each of these was immediately successful.

One of the key participants and long time supporters of the event is Springfield, Mo.-based Watts Radiant. "We've been involved since the beginning and have seen an incredible rise in interest in radiant heat," said Russ Rose, vice president. "Mix F.W. Webb's fantastic sales staff with the contractors from this area, then stir-in a generous portion of Dan Holohan; well, it was a great day for radiant heat at the Expo. The Expo has always been about mutual exchange of information. It's a great learning experience for all that come.

"This year Watts Radiant, thanks to the breadth and power of Watts, has offered several new products," added Rose. "Our above-floor sandwich application, SubRay, was a big hit. It allows you to do hydronic retrofits or new construction on top of the subfloor easily and without the mess. HeatWeave UnderFloor is another retrofit option. Contractors simply staple our electric mats in the joist space for floor warming or small radiant heating applications. And, of course, our flexible EPDM Onix radiant tubing. That's always a show stopper."

Among the new products that also received lots of attention were:

- VRV Product's "Hydroflame" unit - an electric-effect fireplace with hydronic fan coil in it that looks like an elegant stand-alone woodstove;
- Taco's new water and gas safety shutoff valves (WAGs) and low water cutoff valves; and
- Heat Transfer Products' new Superstor Ultra stainless steel indirect water heater with high-output cupronickel coil.

Representatives were also on hand for Delta, Bradford-White, Bell & Gossett, Moen, Buderus, Watts Industries, Eljer, Peerless Boilers, Sloan, Stanley Tools, Gerber, and Z-Flex, among many others.

Parker Wheat, executive vice president, and Ken Fagan, senior account manager, Emerson-Swan, were among the many representatives from their firm, on hand to meet with customers. "For our firm, it's undoubtedly the best event of the year," said Wheat. "F.W. Webb does a tremendous job of bringing in the best contractors from all over the territory. In turn, it's rewarding to watch Emerson Swan's sales force talk nonstop for five hours about key lines and new products, seeing that the trade has a genuine thirst for information."

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