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Cover photo:
After a hot summer that boosted air conditioning sales, contractors are hoping for a long cold winter to do the same for heating products.



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Contractor champions home safety

New niche proves a natural extension of HVAC business

By John Vastyan

Brian Baker, president of Custom Vac Limited, a full-service mechanical contracting firm, is a champion in the battle for home safety. In fact, he's so determined to make homes safer in Winnipeg that he's turned it into a personal and professional calling.

As members of the Winnipeg community for decades, the Baker family has recognized the need to maintain long-term commitment to local customers. As his father did before him, Baker has watched the community grow and, with it, has witnessed the emergence of more complex, more complicated home and building systems, causing him to embark on a home safety crusade several years ago.

In 1995 Brian and wife Denise purchased the business from his parents, Donald and Bernice Baker. Now a firm with six employees, Custom Vac tackles all variety of home safety issues. If a homeowner calls for duct cleaning, they offer – for the same price – to clean the furnace, chimney, vents, blower, air filters, burners, humidifier and air conditioning coil.

Lubricating the blower motor, inspecting the condition of the heat exchanger, cleaning dryer vents to reduce the likelihood of fire; these are all part of Custom Vac's home safety campaign, and it's working among customers.

Indoor air quality

Custom Vac also specializes in systems for indoor air quality (IAQ). Company technicians counsel homeowners on steps that can be taken to improve IAQ, whether tied to a system sale or not, educating homeowners along the way.

Within the past three years, Custom Vac has performed more efficiency tests on furnaces and boilers than in the prior ten years. The majority of systems can be improved in some way. Some were emitting dangerously high levels of carbon monoxide.

"Carbon monoxide is an often-overlooked facet of home safety and one of the most dangerous," said Baker. "So we offer only the CO response kits and detectors that meet all of the key, independent product safety testing and certification standards.

"But what I try to impress upon homeowners is the need for annual inspections of heating equipment and the installation of CO detectors," said Baker. "They don't need our firm to install detectors for them. It's more important that they get one installed and act proactively. I like to think that our highest calling is one that's helpful and

“Our job is to help homeowners stay out of the **line of fire** when the inevitable happens, or – better yet – to prevent it altogether,”

educational. The sale will find us when things line up properly.”

Leaking water heaters

Another safety issue that Baker deals with routinely is leaking water heaters. "With the potential to cause extensive damage – with insurance claims that can easily run from \$3,000 to \$30,000 – leaking water heaters are not something



Home safety is a key business niche for the crew at Custom Vac. From left, in front, are Donald Baker and Craig Oldenburg. Behind, from left, are Derek Sanderson, Allison Baker, Brian Baker and Denise Baker.

to be taken lightly," he added. "All water heaters will leak; it's really only a matter of when they leak.

"Many customers were enjoying typical deductibles of \$500 for homes or

leaking water heater damage. It is designed to shut off the water supply in the event of leak from a water heater, reducing water damage. It also shuts off the gas supply to gas-fired heaters.

Installation times vary from 1-1/2 to two hours, start to finish. When Custom Vac performs the install, the job typically includes draining, cleaning and reinstalling the equipment in a drain pan and making all the necessary changes to keep the water heaters code compliant. The typical bill to the homeowner is less than \$300, installed.

Since 2001, no water heater equipped with the device has been the source of an insurance claim for leakage.

Installing the valves can also help condo managers with the building's insurance.

"The insurance deductible for our condo complex used to be at \$2,500,"

apartments, and \$2,500 for Condo Board Corporations," explained Baker. "But after just one leaking water heater incident, the deductible amount is often increased to \$1,500 or more for homeowners, while companies have seen deductible amounts as high as \$35,000."

Since 2001, Baker's crews have been installing the Taco "WAGS" (Water and Gas Safety) valve to eliminate the risk of

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Technician Derek Sanderson assembles a leak protection system for the water heater.

Water heater protection

Continued from page 39

said Marie Little, one of Custom Vac's appreciative customers. "But due to multiple water heater leaks here at the condo, the amount rose to \$10,000 within a year."

In a matter of months, Custom Vac installed the valves on all the water heaters in the 22-unit complex. The deductible fell back to \$5,000 and may be as low as it was initially by next year. The valve is also covered by its own lifetime policy that covers up to \$1,000 worth of damage if the valve failed in the event of a leak.

"My key obstacle to convincing condo and apartment building owners of the value of these simple valves are the property managers," lamented Baker. "They treat them as an unnecessary widget."

Taking it to the masses

Custom Vac is associated with an organization called Shell Busey's HouseSmart Referral Network (www.TheHouseSmart.com). The network's role is to find solid, reputable service and installation companies.

Various CSA- and UL-approved safety devices are highly supported by Busey and his network. "More people need to start seeing the value in safety products like this. The two main things keeping people from investing in them is the 'it won't happen to me'

mentality, and the added cost," explained Busey.

As part of his House Smart campaign, Busey provides "How Your House Works" training to homeowners, chiefly in British Columbia where he is based. Just recently, Custom Vac helped to expand Shell's educational efforts by setting up classes at the Westech Energy Training Centre in Manitoba.

The house as a puzzle

"The way we describe it to homeowners is something like this: 'A house is like a puzzle, and you just can't have a safe, trouble-free home if a piece is missing,'" said Baker.

"Homeowner's need to know that a water leak may lead to toxic mold growth, or that fully-sealed new homes may cause furnace back-drafting. Some of the important [pieces] will deteriorate or go bad.

"Our job is to help homeowners stay out of the line of fire when the inevitable happens or, better yet, to prevent it altogether," said Baker.

As part of his all-out, all-levels relationship building effort, Baker developed coloring books for children. "It occurred to me that something like this would help when we're in a customer's home," Baker continued. "The coloring book tells a story of how Custom Vac cleans ductwork, and talks about furnaces, ventilation, thermostats and air filters."

The consummate educator, Baker says of his first published coloring book: "I never expected to be teaching three and four-year-old kids about home safety when this all began. But I realized no one's too young to begin learning about safety, and it all starts in the home." +

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