

THE WHOLESALE[®]

News of Plumbing • Heating • Cooling • Industrial Piping Distribution



Ray Bresnahan (left), manager of Able Distributors' phone center, explains the workings of radiant products to a customer. In business for three decades, Able has grown to more than 60,000 square feet of inventory and three locations in the Chicagoland market. The company offers in excess of 10,000 items from 100 manufacturers, including some of the most prominent brands in the industry.

Takagi marks 15 years of business in North America

IRVINE, CALIF. — Takagi is celebrating its 15-year anniversary this month. Takagi was among the first to aggressively and successfully lobby for the acceptance of tankless water heaters in the water heating industry. They were instrumental in increasing (Turn to Celebrating 15... page 39.)

HARDI, J.P. Morgan survey HVAC distributors

COLUMBUS, OHIO — The Heating, Airconditioning and Refrigeration Distributors International has partnered with J.P. Morgan Equity Research in their latest proprietary HVAC distributor survey released in July, which collected market projections (Turn to HVAC... page 26.)

Industry concerned about Cap & Trade
See page 82 for Morris Beschloss' insightful take on this contentious issue.

Involved from the job's start

YC Supply opens a not-so-traditional design center

YORK, PA. — When YC Supply opened its new design center recently in Lancaster, Pa., it contained over a dozen bathroom and kitchen vignettes. But even more appealing for the customer and contractor alike is the company's unparalleled approach to doing business.

"Traditionally, wholesalers do not get involved at the beginning of a bath or kitchen renovation project. Usually the selection process comes at the end of the project, almost as an after-thought," said Kim P.C. Raub, president of YC Supply. "Our approach is truly a benefit for our plumbing and remodeling contractors because

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INSIDE:
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Centerfold!

Holistic wholesaling

The Zen of the wholesale business

BY JOHN VASTYAN

Special to THE WHOLESALER

Last year, Mike Bleier and a buddy toured Cambodia on the backs of dual sport motorcycles. “It was a wild ride,” he said, in an understatement of grand proportions.

But then, this is a guy who, for therapy, throws himself into triathlons and does endurance strength training with ex-Russian special forces strongmen. That’s how he stays on top of his game.

His “Russian Force” training includes kettle bell tossing — hurling

“Do one thing right and not two things wrong. Whenever we get an itch to expand into new technologies, we use those energies to deepen our involvement in the HVAC and hydronic business.”

what he describes as a 45-pound cannon ball with a tea kettle handle attached. The oddity of this is the need to maintain center of gravity when “ballistic movement” would quickly topple a novice. “We use centrifugal force to build functional strength,” he explained. “I guess it’s my own version of a more physical Zen thing.”



Homeowner Joy Baer (left) visited Able Distributors recently with her mechanical contractor John Dunleavy of Patrick’s Mechanical (second from left) to discuss a variety of radiant heat options for her new home. Able’s Piotr Zelasko (far right) and Mike Bleier (second from right) pointed out some Watts Radiant products, including a stainless steel radiant manifold, HeatWeave electric mat, RadiantPEX-AL and Onix EPDM synthetic rubber tubing with oxygen barrier.

And so, in this ballistic, centrifugal market, Bleier excels. The rigors of the selling hydronic and HVAC equipment play into their strength.

Mike Bleier and his brother Daniel are co-owners of Able Distributors, one of Chicago’s most progressive wholesalers. He and Dan see the connection between personal and physical well-being and the art of the wholesale business.

Able Distributors was founded in 1980 by Andrew Bleier in a 800-square-foot store-front space on West Fullerton in Chicago. As a former contractor, their father’s motto was: “The supplier who works with you.” This meant understanding the contractors’ needs and exceeding them. Now almost three decades later, they’ve grown with that premise as the guidepost and directive for all key decisions. Able’s present size includes over 60,000 square feet of inventory and three locations in the Chicagoland market. The company offers more than 10,000 items from 100 manufacturers, including some of the most prominent brands in the industry. Their extensive line card includes Unico, Honeywell, Fujitsu, Taco, Watts Radiant, Maytag and Viessmann.

A few years ago at the height of the construction boom, Able’s revenue reached an all-time high, though it has since coasted back somewhat. “But we’re more profitable today than we were then,” said Dan Bleier. “Every day is an exercise in how to manage the business better. In leaner times, we scrutinize decisions a bit more carefully, and that has led to some surprisingly good things.”

The Bleiers made a calculated move to “open book management” a few years ago, a move Dan Bleier says helped immensely in unifying the company. “It’s one of the largest factors in helping us all to focus on profitability, and the value of each person’s contributions in improving and maintaining it,” he said. “OBM allows



From left, Greg Sterczek assists a customer, while fellow Able Distributors employees Luiz Ortiz, Howard Elovitz and Michael Candella work the counter area.

everyone in the company to see how we are doing on all key metrics at all times: sales, expenses, gross profit, orders, warranties, inventory accuracy, etc. It’s transparent and timely, a beacon for everyone at all levels of the company’s operation.”

Exceeding expectations, yin & yang

Their father’s motto, and recollections of how he so enjoyed getting out to jobsites among their contractor customers, has been the driving force behind an active — even hyperactive — insistence that Able managers today do the same. Mike, as vice president of the firm, Dan, as president, and Piotr (“Peter”) Zelasko, head of their system design department, are more likely to be on the road — visiting jobsites, at trade shows, or involved with installer training at manufacturers or rep firms — than in the office.

The Bleiers, Zelasko and all outside sales professionals have carried Blackberries long before the devices were commonplace. “I guess that makes us early adopters, always a bit ahead of the curve,” said Zelasko, whose quick smile, easy Euro-accent, and an affinity for all things hydronic immediately helps win friends in the field.

Among contractors, who invariably need smart help — and need it now — Zelasko is Able’s superhuman bullet. “Peter’s a laptop, cell phone, hands-on master of the craft and 60,000 pages of technical data on tap all in one,” said Dan Bleier. “He’s an amazingly intelligent and thoughtful guy.”

Zelasko’s pleasant, unassuming demeanor and quiet humor make him immediately approachable, the perfect antidote to stress in the field when problems arise. And, with highly complex mechanical systems, challenges are inevitable. Zelasko’s talents work well in times like these. “He’s always pushing our company to be better, like a finely-tuned ma-

chine,” noted Mike Bleier, whose kinetic energy and quick movements are perfectly counterbalanced by Zelasko’s steady style. Mike Bleier’s decisive qualities, sharp wit and on-line connectedness to all facets of the company’s operations — does this guy sleep? — are at their best when Zelasko is nearby, always ready to offer a slightly different perspective. They often travel and train together, the yin and the yang. Sure, it’s another Zen thing.



Alan Ruiz of Able Distributors pulls some Taco pumps from the warehouse to fill a customer’s order.

Early adopters

Having a Blackberry before anyone in the trade does is one thing; a truer indication of early adopting was Able’s quick move into radiant heat almost two decades ago as an extension of their core hydronics expertise. This was at a time when Springfield, Mo.-based Heatway (now Watts Radiant) was just getting off the ground.

The Bleiers were quick to take on the line and have held fast to it ever since, growing as the manufacturer added a new EPDM tubing, Onix; a huge variety of PEX tubing for radiant and potable water, including a PEX-AL line; brass, copper and stainless steel manifolds; one of the finest prefabricated, pre-engineered control panel lines in the market; a custom-built, commercial skid panel line; and an infinite variety of hydronic components.

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Able Distributors takes wide view

(Continued from page 2.)

“Watts Radiant’s system design software is among the best available today,” said Derek Nowak, system designer in Able’s Design Department. “Their engineering staff and field support personnel, the quality of their training and the product line excel. That’s why we’ve been with



Able’s Piotr (“Peter”) Zelasko studies mechanical prints prior to making a jobsite visit. “It’s all about customer support,” says Peter, who spends a lot more time on the road than in the office.

them so long, and the products have held their own, almost flawlessly, for two decades. I’m sure we’ll be saying the same thing 20 years from now.”

Typical business, and the not-so

Another early move was Able’s quick embracing of geothermal technology. According to Mike Bleier, they see it as a quickly developing field and, with the building global push toward green, renewable systems, they knew its impact would be substantial — and sustainable.

And there are oddities, too, that somehow fit so easily into the broad realm of Able Distributors. Dan Foley, president of Lorton, Va.-based Foley Mechanical Inc., says that hydronics pro Hot Rod Rohr introduced him to Mike Bleier at an RPA event in Chicago about a decade ago.

“I was immediately struck by Mike’s friendly personality and keen interest in hydronic technology and application,” said Foley. “When I found out that he ran a Chicago supply house I was disappointed because I’d hoped to do business with him.

“As it turns out, there was no problem at all; he handed me a catalog, set me up with an account and we did

business for several years — as though I were in a neighboring town. E-mail, internet and UPS made it all happen, and I soon had easy access to hydronic specialties that were hard to find in our area.”

Over time, local supply houses began stocking the items Foley needed and their business tapered off. “But I still see Mike at all of the trade functions and never miss the opportunity to share stories over a cold beverage. I sure wish we had more like Mike in our industry.”

Manufacturer loyalties

Nearly three decades after their father began the business, the Bleiers have maintained a focus on the customer and as part of that they’ve chosen their manufacturer relationships smartly. The inventory is varied — but never to the point where they seriously considered a foray into, say, plumbing products and fixtures.

“We knew that would’ve become a huge distraction. The old adage, ‘Do one thing right and not two things wrong’ applied,” said Mike. “So whenever we get an itch to expand into new technologies, we use those energies to deepen our involvement in the HVAC and hydronic business.”

That led to an assortment of new, specialized hydronic components, even geothermal equipment, and is now pointing Able toward the possibility of solar thermal, PV and wind technology.

In discussing the manufacturers whose products they sell, Mike Bleier commented: “Fujitsu is a great line for us; a product line that gives us a lot of flexibility. They’re going in the right direction and have pumped a lot of resources into R&D. The 26-SEER Halcyon line now offers the best efficiency worldwide and is a perfect match for non-ducted, hydronically heated homes.

“Taco is another good example of intelligent manufacturing. Their circulator, pump and relay lines are broad, diverse and extremely well built. That translates into reliability, performance and happy customers. The Taco brand is also there in the foreground, too — always in the minds of contractors who know the products by name.”

And, of course, Watts Radiant. “Their line has been unbelievable for

us, and with personal relationships that’ve held fast through the years. And those relationships have also included our long-term associations with Bornquist Inc., the manufacturer’s rep where Bob Sticha has been an important link for us.”

A changing world; strength training

Yet, market shifts and evolution are happening quickly, accentuating the importance of maintaining long-term relationships. “We’re delighted when the manufacturers we do business with reveal new and innovative products, and all of them have — it’s a need more important today than ever before,” said Dan Bleier.

“Ten years ago, we would hear about the planned introduction of a new product line — say, a new boiler — for 24 to 36 months before the product was released,” commented Zelasko. “Today, innovation is driving the market, with the need for improved performance and efficiency happening at a furious pace.”

Mike Bleier added, “We’ve even seen how homeowners are now influencing our business and driving sales forcefully. The internet avails access to information freely, and consumers are educating themselves like never before. In response, we’ve got to be sharp, intelligent and on our toes.”

“In our business — because of the pace of innovation and changing

technology — we must dive deeply into an understanding of every important change,” noted Zelasko. “If we don’t stay apprised, and if we lose our ability to carry that information and skill into the field, we lose our relevancy, our purpose — and the customer relationships would suffer as a result.”

That same sense of discipline crosses all facets of business at Able — management of inventory, maintaining proper cash flow, training (attending and conducting it), and seeing to inventory levels and profitability. “It’s a science, a balancing act,” concluded Mike Bleier.

Sounds like the kettle bells are working. Physical training plays into business performance. At Able Distributors, they’re building functional strength.



Gerry Larios moves several Fujitsu mini split units toward the back dock for shipment to a Chicago jobsite.

Others are saying...

“Peter Zelasko is one of the sharpest Euro hydronic technicians I’ve ever met. He has a library of drawing symbols in VISIO that will knock your socks off. I’ve told him numerous times that he could make a living off of those alone, to which he smiles and quietly says, ‘I know, but I’d rather share them with my fellow hydronic technicians for free’

He’s a great guy and I’m glad to say I know him.”

— **Mark Eatherton**
hydronics pro

“I recall meeting Michael Bleier at the ThunderBird Lodge in Minneapolis during the very first RPA event. I remember Michael waiting for the moment when he had time to cross the miles of parking lot to the Mall of

America, located adjacent to the ThunderBird. I believe he used the excuse that he was shopping for sunglasses. But I knew right off he was seeking marketing and advertising ideas and concepts.

Throughout the years, I met his brother Dan, and spent time with his dad Andy. Dan and Mike compliment each other’s style nicely.

Andy was a great source of knowledge and humor — much or which has rubbed off on ‘the boys.’ Team Able under the Bleier leadership, and with its crack employee base, has become one of the premier supplier powerhouses of hydronic knowledge as well as components for the industry. Long may they run.

— **Bob ‘hot rod’ Rohr**
Caleffi training & education mgr.