

# My three sons



From left: Don Rathe and his sons Greg, Matt, and James represent the second and third generations of Rathes in the company. Don Rathe's father, Roy, started the firm in 1969.

## New York-based manufacturers rep Rathe Associates prepares itself for a bright future.

>> By Rachel Wenger  
Photos by Ken Jones Photography

Conduct an informal poll among New Yorkers in the plumbing and mechanical industry and you'd be sure to learn Farmingdale, N.Y.-based manufacturers rep firm and AIM/R member Rathe Associates has a stellar reputation.

However, the firm's stardom didn't happen overnight. "The journey," Rathe Associates President **Don Rathe** says, "began more than 40 years ago."

Long-term customers – and many of them are – would readily affirm it. **Roy Rathe**, Don's father who established the firm in 1969, was known as a great motivator. Don Rathe, who assumed the role of president in 2007, is known as a great commander. Recently, Don's sons **James, Matt, and Greg** have joined the company ranks.

Roy and Don Rathe put their hearts, hands and many long hours into building the firm that serves much of the New York and New Jersey metropolitan areas.

And when a manufacturers rep company stands by for every step of a project it provides products and technology for, as Rathe does, popularity among distribution partners and trade professional customers typically follows. "The level of expertise and know-how they bring to system design, product specification and troubleshooting is extraordinary," Laars Heating Systems Co. General Manager **Bill Root** states.

### Laying the foundation

When he first started the company, Rathe conducted business out of his home. Over the years the company has grown to 23 employees and currently operates a sales office, training center and 20,000-sq.-ft. warehouse.

"What makes us unique is our approach to the market. We get involved," Don Rathe says. "Depending on the products and technology – we provide wholesale shelf items to equipment for high-rise buildings – we tailor our approach and involvement accordingly."

Rathe's line card now includes Tekmar controls (a Watts company), Laars, Caleffi, Insultrap, Comfort PEX, Armstrong, Cash Acme, Sterlco, Axiom, Hydro Level, TurboMax, Winters, Slant Fin, BMI, Kits and Webstone.

"We've been very fortunate to have found a niche in the commercial building systems market," says **Greg Rathe**, Don's third son, who works in inside tech support.

### Wholesale philosophy

Rathe Associates places a particular emphasis on its relationships with local wholesalers. "We sell 100% through wholesale distribution, which allows the contractors to get competitive quotes with quick deliveries," Rathe Associates Vice President **John Byrne** explains. "We consider wholesalers to be our most important partner in getting products to the field."

Don Rathe adds: "Once we're introduced to our customers' customers,

we build and maintain that relationship, too. With our expanded facilities, we're able to introduce the contractors to new products and provide the education they need as part of our training sessions."

Rathe Associates devotes a large amount of time and attention to distributor training, conducting "counter day" events, as well as programs customized to help market products. Before a typical counter day, promotional flyers and emails are sent out. On the day of an event, members from the Rathe team gather at a local supply house and set up displays.

"Our strength, and its one we work on continuously, is the ability to engage customers. We routinely take our distributors and contractors to our manufacturers' facilities and factories," Don Rathe notes. "One of the important things we seek to do is to personalize the relationship between the people who build the products and those who use them. It's especially gratifying to see and be a part of that interaction."

## Building relationships

Rathe's vertical market approach gives its professionals the opportunity to work closely on projects with few distractions. They closely track initial jobsite plans and then installations with the developer and system engineer. When the general contractor and mechanical installer become engaged in the process, this typically triggers an even more robust role for the firm.

Rathe Associates assists its customers through all stages of project inception and design all the way through to completion, concluding with full accountability when the job turns over to a building owner. Through all stages of development, Rathe professionals ensure mechanical systems are designed, installed and running properly.

The firm also features a commission team to make sure everything on a project operates as expected when systems are commissioned. "Preferably exceeding expectation," Don Rathe says. This provides a key benefit as projects move to conclusion.

"It discourages finger-pointing between trades, which easily can happen," he adds. "Our service goes beyond helping with design and installation. On most commercial installations, we're involved for at least 12 months all the way through the 'shakedown' portion of a new project and typically well beyond that."

This process, according to **James Rathe**, Don's first son, who works in outside sales, in some form holds true even for much smaller, residential projects.

## Marketing in the mix

Rathe Associates continuously updates its website, sending out email blasts to customers, keeping them informed of upcoming training, new products and promotions, and making it simple for contractors to sign up online for its training programs. "We're learning how to effectively improve our customer outreach," Don Rathe says.

Becoming a member of best practices group AIM/R in 2008 also has given the firm a boost. Don Rathe recalls attending his first AIM/R conference on crutches following a hip replacement surgery. "One of our manufacturers was encouraging us to be involved in AIM/R," he says. "I went and was very glad I did. AIM/R involvement gives us a chance to work with other agencies and to get new perspectives on business operations. They offer great resources and guidance. Their best practices sessions provide real insights into what has worked for other agencies."



Laars trainer Steve Moruzzi discusses the company's boiler applications during a training session at Rathe Associates headquarters in Farmington, N.Y. Rathe's facility features two large training rooms, one of which includes an entire front wall occupied by a multi-zone hydronic system.

## State-of-the-art training

For decades, Rathe Associates has promoted the value of customer training. Thirty years ago Roy Rathe opened up one of the first rep classrooms in the Northeast. "Grandpa instilled early in my career how important it is that the installer feels comfortable with our products and, as an extension of that, the people who represent them," says **Matt Rathe**, Don's second son, who works in the inside technical support department. "I suppose you could say we've had a lot of time to reflect on what we wanted our new facility to offer, and how best to build it."

The focal points of the company's new facility in Farmingdale are two large training rooms, one of which includes an entire front wall now occupied by a multi-zone hydronic system with state-of-the-art components



Don (blue shirt, against the wall) and James (green shirt) Rathe prepare a group from Mercury Mechanical for a day of hands-on instruction at Rathe Associates' training facility. Rathe places a major emphasis on training its contractor, engineer and wholesale customers.

# RATHE ASSOCIATES

designed purposefully as a working display so technicians can interact with equipment, change operating parameters and make adjustments that influence system operations. The crown jewel of the working display is a Laars modulating-condensing NeoTherm boiler. With three zones in its display, Rathe's boiler delivers heat with two fan-coil units.

"The new facility is loaded with the comforts and technology that will help us train and communicate with customers," Matt Rathe says. "Our goal was to go far beyond simple product demonstrations to create brand-neutral training programs. Many times we've seen 'training areas' that may have one or two items set up in a room, perhaps not even installed or

capable of functioning; they basically serve as just show-and-tell displays. Our concept from the start was to create a hydronics laboratory of sorts where an entire operational hydronic system is on display and available to use as a sophisticated training tool."

Rathe Training Manager **Mike Callahan** adds: "We teach concepts from how different piping strategies work best in different applications to being able to recreate common problems found in the field, which allows the contractor to practice troubleshooting skills. The great thing about it is the contractors aren't limited to desk learning."

At Rathe's training center, contractors interact with a wide range of hydronic equipment. "We're capable of creating many different troubleshooting scenarios with our training modules," Callahan says. "Instead of telling them about how a specific change can influence or alter system performance, we can show them a wide range of cause-and-effect relationships."

**Peter Joselow**, a principal at plumbing and mechanical engineering firm Abraham Joselow, P.C., recommends Rathe's training sessions to his firm's clients. "We know how great the Rathes are with training sessions," he says. "They're like family to us. We've been doing business together for the better part of 45 years."

## Boot camp for hydronics

Rathe's preconfigured training modules allow contractors to work on bad piping scenarios. Training attendees can work through solutions to the challenge and appraise the effect of their work – with no risk of failure.

"The idea is when they're in a real mechanical room, under pressure and in poor lighting, they can recall the steps they may've taken in our lab to solve the problem. In this way, they gain clarity and confidence," Don Rathe says. "Our training modules are called 'Boot Camp for Hydronics.' The intent is to make progressively more complex hydronics challenges a good learning experience, maybe even fun. When contractors come out of these sessions and say 'wow'— we know we've succeeded."

"This is just one way we provide excellent customer service – which is what it's all about. Our customers make decisions and choices each day about where to buy the products they

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# RATHE ASSOCIATES



Company founder Roy Rathe receives a proclamation award from the executive's office of Suffolk County, N.Y., commemorating Rathe Associate's 40th anniversary. Also pictured are Don Rathe (right, back) and his wife, Mary (left, back).

install. Knowing that, we do everything we can to favorably influence those decisions. What separates us from the next agency is our customer support. We work hard at it every day."


Long Island-based contracting firm Integrated HVAC Systems & Services has a more than 20-year relationship with Rathe Associates. "They deliver," Integrated President and co-owner **Ike Beyer** says. "We

get fast, professional support and reliable equipment. When there are questions, it's an open-door policy there. It's part of why our relationship with them is extremely valuable."

## Employee focus

Rathe Associates always has taken pride in its employee relationships. "They're our nucleus," Don Rathe says. "We've become an amazingly talented team."

Many of the employees at Rathe Associates have been with the company for decades. Byrne has been with the firm for almost 30 years, while General Manager **Karl Lorenzen** has worked for Rathe for more than 20 years. Callahan has enjoyed a two-decade tenure and **Annamarie McCabe** started as a secretary 17 years ago and now is the firm's office manager and sales and marketing coordinator.

Don Rathe's sons mark the entry point of the family's third generation involved in the business of building the firm's customer base one relationship at a time. Though the original "My Three Sons" television series saw its last episode in 1965, this new version, starring the Rathes, is just beginning. 

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