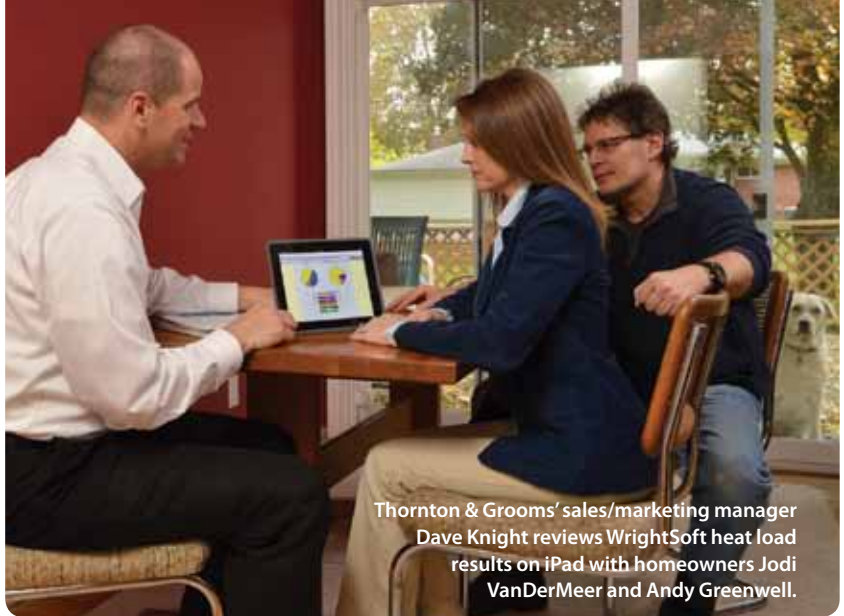


The management team at Thornton & Grooms is taking the firm to the century mark through diversification, technology, and impeccable service.



Thornton & Grooms' sales/marketing manager Dave Knight reviews WrightSoft heat load results on iPad with homeowners Jodi VanDerMeer and Andy Greenwell.

75 and Very Young

by John Vastyan

Fifteen miles Northeast of Detroit — a city that's known its share of hard knocks during the past several years — is Farmington, MI-based Thornton & Grooms Heating and Air. In an economy with a tough, downward pull, Thornton & Grooms (T&G) has refused to participate.

The full-service mechanical contracting firm and its 50 employees celebrated its 75th anniversary in business in 2012. In earlier years, under different management, T&G focused chiefly on plumbing service work. Today, T&G has diversified its offering. The Nexstar-member, flat-rate firm with NATE-certified technicians has shifted its emphases to residential HVAC service and installation for existing homes. The business is owned by Dave Knight, sales and marketing manager, and his partners, brothers Matt Bergstrom, president/plumbing operations manager, and Mike Bergstrom, manager of HVAC operations.

Many of the region's older homes are heated and cooled by hydronic systems, so it makes sense that the mostly-residential, replacement, service and repair experts at T&G have worked hard to maintain a reputation as one of the most reliable sources for handling tough challenges, even to include work on cranky steam systems. A few years ago, they trained for and developed geothermal expertise.

"We do some geothermal work each year," Knight says. "The economy is one challenge to geothermal, and the other is the typical lot size in the Detroit area. Many lots are too small for the big vertical drilling rigs, or for the distance required between boreholes for proper geoechange. One of the things we need to explore is the possibility of a directional drilling rig."

Advantages of Applied Technology

One of Thornton & Grooms' competitive advantages is its firm belief in the value of new technology.

"We've learned of the need to invest in the right technology and the advantages it offers," Knight says. "We can't be a

key player in the geothermal business in our market until we resolve the drilling issue and how best to handle it. We market our firm traditionally, and also on Angie's List, Twitter and YouTube. And, when we saw how powerful and flexible portable computing systems and smart phones could be as tools for our employees, the next step was to invest in heat load sizing software to strengthen the work our field techs and estimators were doing in the field."

The firm's Carrier rep provided information on Wrightsoft technology. "We were immediately interested and found that, within a day, we could be up and running with an entirely new, streamlined approach to system sizing," Knight recalls. "We already had several iPads and smart phones; each device can be used to operate the software, though the iPads have the advantage of size and easier use."

T&G uses the Wrightsoft Carrier Right Suite Universal product in the office and the Wrightsoft Right J Mobile in the field.

"With better software, we've improved the accuracy and speed of our load calcs while also giving us a more compelling way to engage and interact with customers," said Knight. "We've also tightened our estimates while giving our techs a range of options, each with a price that reflects choices made by the homeowners."

With this software in its regimen, Knight explains that, while still inside the customers home, T&G estimators and technicians can send information or a draft of the estimate to one or more locations simultaneously, and receive lightning-quick response. With the iPad app, technicians and sales professionals are able to quickly and accurately perform block load Manual J calculations in the field. When Manual D data is required, the Wrightsoft Universal is used to design the duct system and to generate an accurate bill of materials.

"Right J Mobile, the software we use on iPads and smart phones, is ideal for residential load calculations," said Knight. "We have four licenses, one for each replacement specialist. We put a lot on the line when we offer our guarantee: 'If we can't maintain comfort in the home, we'll replace the equip-



ment. It's a five-year guarantee and, not once have we had to pay-up on the promise. I believe it's a testament to the accuracy of the software. In fact, the

In T&G's vendor-managed inventory area, Barnett team member Michael 'Toby' Dudenas selects copper fittings for a job.

guarantee coincided with our first use of Right J Mobile.

Staying Sharp Against Increased Competition

According to Knight, the quality of competition has sharpened lately. There are new companies in the greater Detroit area and a broader sense among them about what it takes to be professional. Fortunately, there was little catch-up work to do. We learned long ago the importance of training, which we do here regularly, with NextStar, and also with vendors.

"In fact, we have a goal to be the number one service company in the Detroit metro area. We're not quite there yet, but we're working on it every day," Knight claims. "This also helps us determine the people we hire. Our on-line reviews show that when we make mistakes, we learn from them. The common thread with our successes and good reviews is the quality of our people."

According to Knight, after every installation or customer visit, they make follow up "Happy Calls" by phone. T&G designates one or two staff persons to call the customer, asking for feedback on a scale of 1 to 10. Knight says the lowest rating they'll accept is a 9.5 for any question. "We've been getting great reviews, though occasionally we slip. "If it's less than a 9.50 on the 10 scale, we dig deeper," he says.

Spirit of Independence

Dave Knight's father and the Bergstrom's father both owned HVAC businesses. In the late 90s, during a period of multiple consolidations, both HVAC firms were sold to Blue Dot.

"We didn't want to work for a corporation," Knight explains. "We were looking for a company to buy — specifically, a strong residential firm with an existing customer base, rather than starting at zero —and we found T&G. We acquired the company on Labor Day, 2004."

At the time of the purchase, T&G was doing about \$1 million in revenue. Today, that number has topped \$6.5 million.

"We attribute our growth to our



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people. They love what they do. I'm so glad that I can say this with certainty, that our people enjoy the work, and are very professional and confident in their roles. It's so gratifying to be able to say that with conviction," Knight adds.

And if maintaining and growing a business in a tough economy isn't chal-

lenging enough, managers are firmly dedicated to giving back.

'Comfort' for Those in Need

"We understand the need to help the less fortunate in our community; we do that through community outreach and charitable causes, and also through



Bledar Burkuti, T&G installation coordinator, services residential equipment.

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- Dec 3-4 - San Antonio, TX
- Dec 3-4 - Cypress, CA
- Dec 17-18 - Washington, DC

- Nov 18-20 - Salt Lake City, UT
- Nov 19-21 - Richmond, VA
- Dec 10-12 - Philadelphia, PA
- Dec 10-12 - Madison, WI

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- Oct 1-3 - Baltimore, MD
- Oct 8-10 - Detroit, MI
- Oct 15-17 - Denver, CO
- Oct 22-24 - Phoenix, AZ
- Oct 29-31 - Tampa, FL
- Nov 12-14 - Milwaukee, WI
- Nov 19-21 - St. Louis, MO
- Nov 25-27 - Cincinnati, OH
- Dec 17-19 - Atlanta, GA

Residential & Light Commercial Air Balancing with Certification

- Sep 10-12 - St. Louis, MO
- Sep 24-26 - Pompano Beach, FL
- Sep 24-26 - Cypress, CA
- Oct 1-3 - Atlanta, GA
- Oct 8-10 - Tulare, CA
- Oct 29-31 - Sacramento, CA
- Nov 12-14 - Cleveland, OH

our Hearts & Heroes Award," Knight says. Each winter, T&G partners with the Royal Oak Community Coalition to conduct a blanket and coat drive for local homeless shelters. The goal: to keep local seniors, children and adults warm through the harsh winter months.

•Last year, the firm donated \$1,000 to "Leader Dogs for the Blind" on December 13 to support the charity's work in providing leader dogs and training at no charge to blind and visually impaired teens and adults.

•T&G has also conducted a food drive for local food banks with the goal of collecting 4,000 pounds of food that's distributed to food banks. T&G offered additional discounts for services with donations of five cans or boxes of food or more.

Knight says that Thornton & Grooms' own Hearts & Heroes Award was originally created to provide help to local charitable groups and organizations weather the tough economy. It's since evolved to provide assistance to a local persons or family by installing a free furnace, air conditioner or water heater. Since its beginning in 2009, T&G has donated more than \$30,000 to local charities nominated by local customers.

"The mission is simple and successful. Presenting awards to and conversing with the recipients has been the highlight of each month," says Mike Bergstrom, T&G vice president. "It's become a part of our identity, our mission, and our community outreach."

John Vastyen is president of Common Ground, a trade communications firm based in Manheim, PA that specializes in the hydronics, radiant heat, plumbing and mechanical and HVAC industries; he can be reached at 717/664-0535.

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