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# SUPPLYHOUSE

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and customer service.

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Bill Maxwell (left) and Mark Maxwell.

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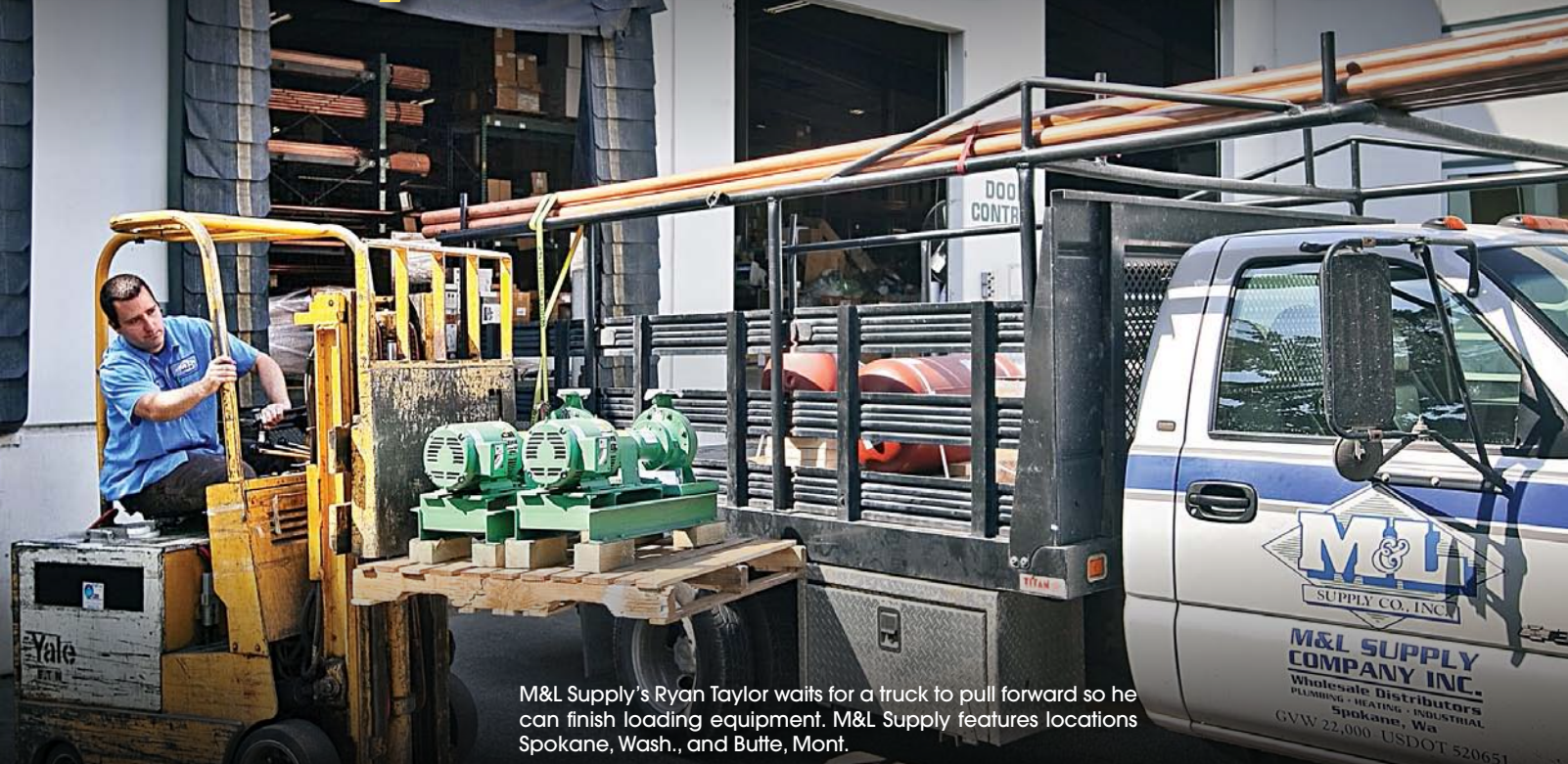
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# History moves forward



M&L Supply's Ryan Taylor waits for a truck to pull forward so he can finish loading equipment. M&L Supply features locations Spokane, Wash., and Butte, Mont.

## Spokane, Wash.-based M&L Supply is rich in heritage and customer service.

>> By Dan Vastyan  
Photos by Dan Frisch, Springfield, Mo.

In 1934, a young entrepreneur by the name of **Thomas Norman Maxwell** started a plumbing and heating supply company in the mining boomtown of Butte, Mont.

He quickly learned to appreciate the advantages of commitment, unparalleled customer service and value. Now in its fourth generation, M&L Supply Co. still is a family-owned enterprise guided by these original principles. Its current headquarters, which opened in 1956 in Spokane, Wash., serves eastern Washington and northern Idaho. The Montana location is in its 80<sup>th</sup> year.

Over the decades, a variety of acquisitions and relocations have strengthened the operation. Thomas' son, **David**, bought into the company in the 1970s and grew the firm for 40 years. He led the company through many challenging economies, always staying true and never compromising the original principles. He also knew the importance of providing employees with a quality work environment. He implemented a 100% employer-contributed retirement plan, and medical benefits for employees and their families that still are in place today.

"We never let go of the original philosophies," says **Bill Maxwell**,

David's son and the company's vice president of operations. "If not for the relationships we've built through a commitment to superior service in every regard, there's no way a two-branch privately-held plumbing, heating and industrial wholesale distributor could compete against larger national and regional ones."

While smaller than the big supply houses in major metro areas, the main facility in Spokane is impressive. The 46,000-sq.-ft. distribution center offers a cornucopia of residential, commercial and industrial products and technologies; the inventory value exceeds \$2.5 million.

A newly-remodeled plumbing showroom serves homeowners, designers and installers, and a 20,000-sq.-ft. pipe yard stands ready for tall orders.

Bill and his brother, **Mark**, who serves as vice president of sales, attribute the company's success to the added value it offers customers. Each of M&L's 38 employees knows that exceeding customer expectations needs to be the sole focus.

"We're not looking to sell widgets or to fill a quota," Bill Maxwell says. "We want to be the same wholesaler that my grandfather was. That means partnering with area contractors so they can provide the construction



industry with quality finished product. Whatever they need, that's what we're going to provide: Same-day delivery? Training on new products? Design help? That's what we're here for."

## Ultimate service

"Ours rarely will be the lowest cost for products and technology, but we'll always be the best on service," Bill Maxwell says. "Price rarely comes up in conversation when you're servicing the hell out of your customer. It becomes the fifth consideration on the list."

The company is staffed two-to-one against many other area distributors, which allows ASA member M&L a much higher level of service. "If an installer isn't too comfortable with intricate hydronic system design someone on our staff will sit down and do a heat load calculation, a piping layout and head to the jobsite to assist in getting started," Bill Maxwell says. "If it's a commercial project, **Ian Louthian** helps with the designs as well."

Louthian is a vice president at Spokane-based manufacturers rep Suntoya Corp, which has a relationship with M&L dating back to 1956. **Rob Richard** is the president of Suntoya and heads the plumbing department there, while son, **Robby**, and Louthian head the heating side of the business. Robby Richard, now a principal at Suntoya, handles residential equipment and designs, while Louthian focuses on commercial projects.

Another distinguishing feature of M&L is the depth and breadth of its inventory. By offering a wider selection and more products on the shelf, it is able to fill orders quickly and completely, while offering a bigger part of the whole package. Bill Maxwell knows the company's most significant value to its customers is having what they need, when they need it.

"When we design a system, installers rarely, if ever, shop it out at our competitors," he states. "They know we'll stand behind it and help them through the whole install; something they can't always expect elsewhere. As an industry, we've lost view of why a wholesaler has value to a contractor or end user. You just want parts? Go to one of the big box stores; that's not what we do. If you want product knowledge, selection and superior service, we're here to assist you."

The company is quick to adopt new technologies, and even quicker to help installers do the same. Over the course of a year, numerous training courses are offered in its Spokane location. One or two each year include a certification program.

But there's no point in holding training courses if nobody knows they're scheduled. The approach M&L uses to get the message out is unique.

## Lead by example

"If you Google us, you'd find a Yellow Pages listing and no more," notes **Matt Maxwell**, Mark's son, who is part of the inside sales department. "We don't have a website because we don't want contractors to simply click and compare price. Our goal is to get them on the phone so we can tell them about training, specials and incentives, and find out exactly what their needs are."

But according to the Maxwells, that attention to detail on the phone or in person doesn't often come naturally. It's an attitude and mindset everyone in the company needs to learn. And it starts at the top.

"As owners, we need to lead by example," Mark Maxwell says. "If I'm not taking my level of customer service seriously, there's no reason anyone else will either. Leading by example is so important in a small business. But it



Left to right: M&L Supply's Mark and Bill Maxwell work closely with manufacturers rep Suntoya, which features the father/son team of Rob and Robby Richard.

goes without saying I learn from our employees as often as they learn from me. To provide this level of service, it really needs to be a group effort."

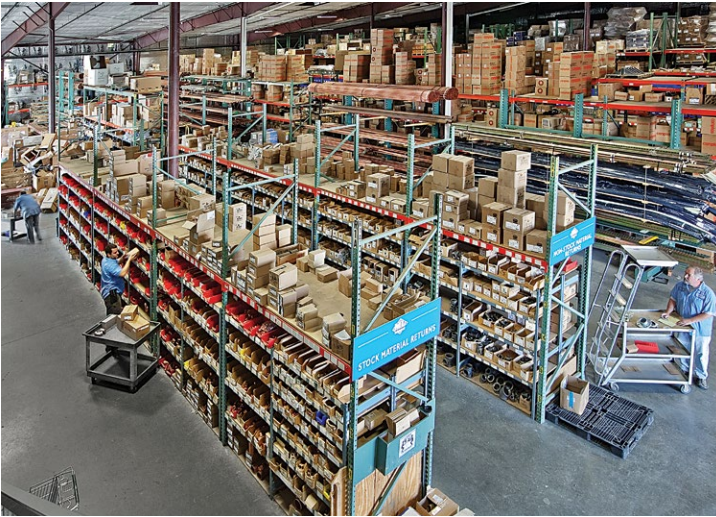
Part of that effort stems from their cross-training of employees. Everyone in the sales department is knowledgeable enough to handle calls. Management also takes its turn in training, as well as manning the phones. It's a recipe they've found fosters the highest level of professionalism. In addition, the business runs smoothly when everyone understands the other person's job.

"Our passion for doing this isn't selling," Mark Maxwell says. "It's not meeting a boss' expectation and it's not in advancing a career by chalking up 'wins' at every turn. We take pride in being a *really good* wholesaler, one worthy of the type of customer referrals that can't be bought and must instead be won. This means a willingness to invest in our employees."



M&L Supply prides itself on superior customer service. Pictured in the Spokane will-call counter sales area are employees, from left: Billy Andersen (lead counter sales), Clay Cottrell and Gate Bates.

# M&L Supply



M&L Supply's 46,000-sq.-ft. distribution center holds more than \$2.5 million in inventory.

## Market response

"We're always watching to see what the market is doing, what sectors are growing and others that are shrinking," Mark Maxwell says. "It's always shifting and we do our best to respond. One way we do that is by running specials on corresponding equipment."

The effectiveness of the programs became apparent last year when M&L worked with Robby Richard at Suntoya to increase residential Taco sales. They designed a special 12-ft. gondola display of Taco residential products as part of a 3,000-sq.-ft. customer self-service area. It utilizes Taco's new point-of-sale program that showcases residential products. The goal was to get the complete mix of Taco residential heating products in front of customers on a daily basis and show them the selection of pumps, controls and components. It doubled annual sales in the first six months.

But commercial equipment is M&L's bread and butter (Taco's commercial line, Mark Maxwell notes, accounts for more than \$300,000 in sales each



M&L Supply has an 80-year history of serving the American West. Thomas Norman Maxwell started the company in 1934.

year). It has seen growth in large radiant and snow-melt applications for schools, universities and office buildings. Building owners are opting to install snow-melt systems, especially in "liability" areas. The added upfront cost is less than the potential damage from a single slip-and-fall lawsuit.

Mark Maxwell notes the company also is a big proponent of carrying American-made lines, such as Taco and Watts to name just a few. "We carry a lot of great lines that we're especially glad to have," he says. "Those typically are brands that have a very wide product offering matched with a good reputation. On the hydronic and plumbing side, Taco and Watts come to mind."

## Nimble by design

Over the years, the people at M&L Supply have learned that their own success lies in the success of their customers. Different customers require different kinds of service, meaning they must remain agile and ready to adapt.

McKinstry, one of the country's largest mechanical firms with a branch in Spokane, took its logistic challenges to M&L Supply when ramping up for a large remote project. M&L hauled parts and equipment to the site and helped McKinstry set up a temporary warehouse there, 170 miles from Spokane. In the process, the M&L trucks also moved gang boxes full of tools, ladders and prefabricated material. Everything was waiting for McKinstry employees by 6:30 a.m., the day after the order was placed.


"If that's what they need, then that's what we're here for," Mark Maxwell says. "We want to be the installer's left arm."

Despite the high level of service, there still are situations where M&L needs to sell on price. Large material requests for city projects may fit this description. Even then, M&L has positioned itself to make the best of the situation by belonging to the suburban Dallas-based WIT buying group. This helps put the company on a level playing field with the national chains when it comes to purchasing products at the right price.

M&L's wide product offering allows it to supply a much greater portion of the equipment needed for almost any project; making it a virtual one-stop shop. Instead of just selling the pipe for a job, M&L can offer the fittings, valves, fixtures, water heaters, connectors and relief valves as well. With this advantage, it often makes the sale even if it is a few dollars over the next bid.

On the commercial scene, the work M&L most enjoys is working with engineers. Earlier last year M&L was involved with a 700-unit LEED hotel in the design phase that is planned for construction in Spokane.

"The mechanical engineer on the job knows that we stay current on information regarding LEED products," Mark Maxwell says. "So Ian, Rob and I are helping him spec the job, putting boiler and fixture packages together to give him the highest level of efficiency at the best dollar value possible."

"In my grandfather's day, there was some competition between reps and wholesalers. Today, we're each other's greatest assets, especially when manufacturers understand the goal, too. We all have one common objective; to see the installer succeed. We can't lose sight of that. Providing our customers with what they need, when they need it and at a great price is something we intend to do for generations to come." 

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