

Like Father, Like Son

BY JACK FOSTER

Thankfully Dan Wolfskill was just as attracted to the rep way of life as his father was years before him. That's why the transition of agency leadership from father, Joe, to son, Dan, has gone so smoothly for MANA member James Industries, Inc. (JII).

The story of this Bellville, Texas (about 60 miles northwest of Houston), rep firm begins with Joe Wolfskill, who explains that he began his career in 1974 on the corporate side. After completing training programs all over the country in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and York, Pennsylvania, a rep career called out to him. According to Wolfskill, "I can still recall my reaction to a six percent pay raise from my manufacturer employer after I was killing myself out in the field. On top of that, inflation was three times that, so it was impossible to make ends meet.

"After that I went to work with a rep located in New Orleans. He was close to retirement and hired me with the goal of me being his replacement. Immediately the rep business really appealed to me, and I realized early on that it was rewarding in direct proportion to my own efforts and efficiency. It wasn't like the corporate world where too often you're told 'That's all we can give you for a raise.'

Plus, I enjoyed the face-to-face opportunities with customers and the freedom a rep life offered."

That's why when the opportunity presented itself to open his own agency in 1982, Wolfskill jumped at the chance. Armed with a \$10,000 loan, JII was incorporated by Wolfskill and his wife, Jill. Their plan was to create a rep company that was deeply rooted in its core values of trust, excellence, accountability and meaning. The agency initially served the electric power industry in Texas and Oklahoma and the engineering and construction firms serving them. The agency's service territory has grown to include New Mexico, Arkansas and Louisiana. In addition to territory growth, JII has hired a team of professional sales and office personnel to ensure proper coverage of the territory. The agency continues to call on engineering, procurement and construction decision makers and plant level end users. The agency currently has four full-

Page 11: Joe Wolfskill, founder (standing), and Dan Wolfskill, president, of James Industries, Inc.



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time salespeople, two administrators, and one who acts as a consultant.

Growing Up in the Business

That brings us to son, Dan, who’s included in that professional sales team, and his beginnings with JII. According to the younger Wolfskill, “Growing up I had always been exposed to the family business. It was always present at the dinner table; it raised me and put me through college. Naturally I had an interest in it, but first I felt I had to complete college, get a job, and begin my career.” Just as his father before him, Dan began on the corporate side of the desk, accepting a job with Texas Instruments while he was still a student in college. “I figured this was great. I had a job and could ride out college and put my career plans in place. But I have

to admit that the ‘apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.’ It didn’t take me long to realize I wasn’t cut out for life in corporate America.

“At the same time, I was curious about being out and about and solving peoples’ problems. Thankfully a position opened up with JII that allowed me to stay in Dallas and cover the agency’s northern territory.

He goes on to explain that next came his “baptism of fire,” as he was exposed to what he good naturedly refers to as “Joe’s School of Sales Training.”

“Then I was off on my own. That was eight years ago and as I look back, I’ve totally enjoyed what I’ve done. I was able to dictate my own strategies and plans. Along with that there was a lot of slack in the reins, allowing me to develop my own style. I don’t think I could ever go back to what I was doing prior to joining the agency.”



Left to right: Melanie Brunner, Mike Coleman, Dan Wolfskill, and Joe Wolfskill discuss a product.



“The James Gang” (left to right): Robert Bland, Eva Coffey, Dan Wolfskill, Jill Wolfskill, Joe Wolfskill, Melanie Brunner, Mike Wolfskill, and Mike Coleman.

Dan continues that as the eight years passed, “I transitioned from employee to salesman and then made a move up the ranks in preparation for me to take the reins as part of my father’s succession plan.”

Transition Plans

As Dan Wolfskill was climbing the ranks in preparation for an eventual transition to leadership of the agency, Joe was also making plans. “I honestly started thinking about transition as long as eight years ago. At the same time, I had Dan in mind. I didn’t want him to feel obligated, nor did I even know if he’d really enjoy heading the firm. He spent a couple of years with us getting his feet under him. From my perspective it was obvious that he possesses the entrepreneurial spirit that any rep needs. It’s been really great to see the flower blooming in him.”

When it was time to have the rubber meet the road in terms of planning the transition, Joe explains that he worked closely with MANA attorney Tom Kammerait. “Planning and executing a transition is brand new for me. Tom has been through it numerous times. As a result, as I look back at what we’ve gone through, everything went smoothly. There probably wasn’t a better time for us to do this since we had our best year last year and this year (2022) is even better.” The elder Wolfskill adds that the transition agreement involves a five- to seven-year payout to him. He explains that “Sure, there might be some things that are hard to swallow on both sides, but I think we accomplished a great agreement. I’m still involved with a couple of proj-

ects and figure that I’ll remain involved in the agency for another year or two.” He adds with a laugh, “I’ve figured out that these guys really don’t need me anymore.”

It should be noted that the “these guys” he refers to now include a younger brother to Dan, Mike, and an older sister, Sarah, both of whom work for JII.

Commenting on the transition, Dan notes, “It was actually hard for me not to gravitate to the family business. You’ve got to realize that it’s actually ingrained in my DNA. As we went through the transition process, sure there were some generational disagreements and differences, but when all was said and done, we found a great deal of common ground. And, the bottom line is that we have a great deal of respect for each other.

“I looked at the task of taking over the reins very seriously. I’m well aware of the fact my father casts a long shadow and I’ll do my best to match it. It’s certainly been much more than just turning over the keys. As I look back, I’m very appreciative of the achievements my parents made in starting the agency. We now have more than a 40-year reputation to rely upon. We’ve got great partners to work with and it’s an ideal time for us to make the transition. From a cashflow standpoint, there’s sufficient income to cover the cost and overhead while we support the sale. While I don’t have millions in the bank, we’ve been able to achieve this transition privately and we don’t need to involve a bank. Sure, the transition might seem daunting when looking at the payment schedule, but so far so good. We have enough momentum to continue to meet our fu-

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ture commitments. From my perspective I certainly enjoyed working with Tom Kammerait on the transition as we ironed out all the details.”

Communication Is Key

Both men agree that a key aspect of accomplishing the transition was their ability to communicate well with principals, customers, and agency staff. According to Dan, “I think we did a great job of letting our own people know what was going on. As a result, there was really no shock to anyone. We retained all of our employees. At the same time, my father has been very transparent with the key people at our principals. Leading up to the transition, I would accompany my father to see them and visit their offices to build on those relationships to ensure a high degree of confidence in the new leadership. In terms of our customers, we’ve been very clear what was happening and invested sufficient time transitioning Joe’s relationships to members of our sales team to ensure the transition was seamless.”

All the while JII has accomplished its transition, JII and its staff continue to face just as many of the challenges as its rep peers, whether it’s dealing with changes that have affected the profession, successfully identifying new principals or finding new employees as the need arises.

- In dealing with change, Joe Wolfskill cites the impact that technology has had on the rep business. “First you had the fax machine and then the laptop computer and everything that comes with it. The sheer speed of the business has changed and with that change we as reps have to be more responsive to both our principals and customers. Sure, you can’t replace the impact of the face-to-face visit, but things have really changed.

Dan offers, “I think the speed of communication fits very well with our business. We’re very comfortable with all of the communication tools available in today’s business environment. Joe did a great job of keeping the agency up to speed. We continue building a detailed database for every order we’ve booked dating back to 1982. I remain very interested in adopting any new technology that can serve us and our principals and customers.”

- When it comes to locating new principals, both men agree that MANA has been a great resource. Dan Wolfskill notes, “We keep our eyes and ears open and when we locate a principal, we invest the time to get to know each other to ensure a partnership can blossom. Establishing proper rep-principal expectations is key to ensuring that long-term success.

As he continues to talk about principals, Dan notes how important it is to constantly evaluate lines to ensure their value to the agency. “Just two years ago we parted ways with a principal that represented 50 percent of our business.” According to Joe, “Sure, that was a painful experience, but while they represented 50 percent of our income, they also consumed 80 percent of our time and effort. We made the decision, got over our stage fright and moved on. As a result of making that change, we surpassed the business that we lost.”

- When it comes to the subject of replacing personnel as openings occur, Joe Wolfskill notes that continues to be an important subject. “Here’s the difficulty when it comes to hiring someone to sell for an agency — you have to find someone who is multi-disciplined and has the emotional interest to wear many hats at the same time. It’s tough to get the right match and find someone who shares your values. At the same time, you need someone who is adept at selling, because you can always teach the technical stuff.”

To meet that challenge, “We know a lot of people and have a lot of contacts within our industry. We simply keep our eyes and ears open when looking for someone who might be interested in a new opportunity.”

While both father and son have already commented on their experience of finding attorney Tom Kammerait through MANA, in conclusion Joe offered that the reason he joined MANA when he opened his agency was that “When I was working in an extra office that a rep had in Houston, he told me about the association. Once I learned about what MANA offered, it was really a no brainer, and we remain a member to this day.”

MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.