

Dick's Lumber: another Canadian Success Story

By Wolf Gugler

How does one hire, develop and retain good store level talent? In this ongoing series, we profile British Columbia's Dick's Lumber—a Sexton buying group member and another example of success in employee hiring and development.

David Alexander, Dick's General Manager is proud of his operation; two locations in Burnaby and Surrey, B.C. founded by David's parents, Dick and Delma Alexander in 1964. Originally beginning in one location with five employees, Dick's has grown to its current two locations (8 and ten acres respectively), an employee complement of 120, and sales exceeding \$100 million annually!

Dick's is well known as a one-stop shop for all lumber and building materials products including those for finishing, cabinetry, mouldings and hardware. They are the largest Dealer in Canada for engineered wood products. Their business mix is approximately 80/20, Contractor vs. Retail—although their Retail business is growing rapidly with good margins. As David says, “the lumber market is hot”, they carry large inventory with well-planned timely buying and are having a banner year.

His longest-serving employee has been with him 27 years, with many others in the 20-year range, and still more with ten to fifteen years' tenure. We asked David what key areas of his business he felt have the greatest contribution to his employee development and retention. As he feels “Our employees are what make Dick's Lumber”, these are his thoughts:

- ✍ “We're **very** clean and efficient. We do not look like the typical lumberyard. Our mill looks like an office building. For instance, we spent almost a million dollars on our racking system. We also buy top-quality equipment for our Employees. They also have a very clean and well laid out lunchroom for their use. In return, they treat it as though it were their own, with pride, cleanliness and accuracy in their work. Their positive attitude demonstrates it works!”
- ✍ “As our outside workers are unionized, we pay the top union wage scales. That way, we don't get into labor disruptions as others have, and poor union/management relations. There is no “union mentality” here. They sense they're working for the best organization around and give it their all.”
- ✍ “All Employees are aware that the Managers are approachable. Although we encourage them to speak directly with their Supervisor, they can approach any one of us to ask a question and get a straight answer.”
- ✍ “When it comes to hiring, we take people from all walks of life. We encourage our Managers and Assistant Managers to refer others they see giving exceptional service. For instance, we've had excellent successes hiring Customer-oriented staff from a local car wash, and a local restaurant chain famed for it's customer-friendly staff. We're totally prepared to teach them from the ground up. We've also done well hiring people in the lumber industry for their specific area knowledge, whether it is power tools, hardware and others. That way, we do become known for our specialists.”

☞ “We flex re: holiday schedules; some of our long-service Employees have five or six weeks’ vacation, and highly appreciate our willingness to try and fit in their family plans with our work requirements.”

☞ “Last, we simply ask our Employees to treat our Customers as they would like to be treated themselves. I began from the ground floor up, and do this by example. That’s why unsolicited letters of compliment about our staff arrive regularly. One of our staff members is regularly commended for arriving early or staying late to accommodate a Customer’s busy schedule. In return, they are all rewarded at the end of the year with a profit sharing incentive.”

David summarized by telling us, “We have plenty of competition, including Home Depot directly across the street, Revy just a mile away, and other locals as well. We stick to our business basics, and do what we do well. That’s why, even though our Competitors regularly try to headhunt our people, they stay with us—because they don’t have a reason to consider leaving.”

Would you share your ideas and have your operation profiled for upcoming articles? We’d appreciate hearing about your “employee success formula” or tips for other Retailers to learn from.

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