

Fit for a King

New England painting contractor takes command of commercial market

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Chris King is known as the king of retail and hospitality painting in the Boston area. That title wasn't granted - it was earned by working 80 hours a week for more than a decade to build his company into one of the biggest commercial painting contracting firms in New England.

"I started out in 1987 painting houses by day while going to college to study marketing at night," he says. Two years later, through a friend's referral, he won his first commercial bid - an Italian restaurant. The owner was so happy with the results that he hired King to paint 18 more of the restaurants in his chain. King's commercial business soon supplanted his residential work - and his original career path. Instead of pursuing a position in the marketing field, King applied the skills he learned in college to promote and build his own business. He even designed the company's web site (www.kingpaintinginc.com).

King's company covers three states - Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

He buys more than 40,000 gallons of paint and brings in more than \$6 million of revenue a year. In the last two years, the company painted 17 new hotels and 300 retail shops as well as several educational and manufacturing projects. King has a full-time staff of 40 people and bids on about 1,000 jobs from general contractors annually, generally winning about 200 of those.

"I've never regretted it," he says of his career path into painting. The freedom of being my own boss means a lot to me. There are a lot more headaches, but it's also a lot more fun. I can't imagine having any other job."

Building with people

Building the infrastructure to turn a work-from-home, one-man shop into a 40-employee operation was one of the toughest parts of his business, King says. His first advice to other small contractors who want to grow is to do what it takes to retain top-quality people.

"To keep your better employees, you have to offer good pay and benefits," he says. "It may seem like a hard thing to do when you're still a small company, but it pays off in the long run."

By offering excellent working conditions and above-average salaries and benefits, King says he is now able to retain 95 percent of his staff from year to year. His 3-state territory covers a 200-mile radius, so he also hires painters that live in Rhode Island and New Hampshire as well as those near his home base in North Andover, Mass., about 30 minutes north of Boston.



"There is a shortage of construction workers," he says. "Hiring people to work where they live so they don't have to travel makes sense. If they can work within a 100-mile radius of home, they're a lot happier."

Managing manpower

Having enough manpower to get large jobs done quickly is a strong selling point for the company, and a way to stay busy in a fluctuating economy. But it's also King Painting's major day-to-day challenge.

"It's our biggest juggling act," King says. "Sometimes we'll have four hotel projects going on simultaneously, so we need a lot of manpower. Other times, we need to find work so that all of our painters are busy. It's important for employee retention to avoid layoffs."

To that end, he will bid on small as well as large jobs. On an average day, the company will be working on 20 different projects at any given time. King stays in constant contact with two field supervisors to track each project's labor, product and other costs. Everything is fed into the office computer for maximum efficiency.

"I know at the press of a button if a project is under or over budget," he says. "That helps us react to make adjustments when necessary. It really adds to our profitability."

"We use Sherwin-Williams for many reasons," King says. "One is logistics. We work in three different states, and Sherwin-Williams offers us many store locations with uniform products and pricing." Besides the convenience of multiple outlets to fulfill his product needs, King likes the fact that his company gets the personal attention of just one sales rep, Jim Gill.

"Jim is in contact with us every day, and handles the coatings requirements on all our complicated jobs," King says. "He knows our business, and he knows which coatings will work best on our projects."

The state of Massachusetts, for example, has extremely strict VOC regulations, and Gill assisted King Painting when they won the bid for the area's newly constructed Environmental Protection Agency headquarters by recommending high-quality, low VOC coatings that met or exceeded the state regulations. Sherwin-Williams ProMar 200 Interior Alkyd Semi-Gloss was selected for interior doors and frames, and Sherwin-Williams ProMar 200 Latex Eg-Shel was used on the interior walls.



"ProMar 200 is the product I use in a majority of our jobs," King says. "It's a top-of-the-line coating with great coverage, super flow and ease of application." Touchup is also a breeze.

"That's important when there are a lot of trades following behind us," he says. "You pay a bit more per gallon, but it's such an efficient coating that it actually costs less in the long run."

For a company that handles more than 200 projects a year, that savings adds up. Quality and efficiency controls like these show why Chris King sits on the throne of New England's commercial paint market.