

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Award-winning Michigan rental center moves into sales and joins AED.

By Jane Easter Bahls

Ask Steve Vanker what's most important to his Waterford, Mich., equipment center, and he'll tell you immediately: customer satisfaction.

That's what determines the quality of rental equipment, the speed of service and the friendliness of the people behind the counter at Midwest Tool & Equipment Center (MTEC). That's why this business on the outskirts of Detroit won an international award for customer service two of the past three years. And that's why this newcomer to AED is now moving into sales.



To better serve customers, AED newcomer Midwest Tool & Equipment Center is adding lines now in the Detroit area.

"We have an inverted corporate structure," says Vanker, owner and general manager. "I'm at the bottom of the flow chart. My job is to serve my managers and give them the tools and service they need." The managers, in turn, serve the sales reps, mechanics and other front-line people whose job is to serve those at the top of the chart: the customers. A committed Christian, Vanker says he's exercising his spiritual gift of service and encouraging his employees to do the same.

That mindset builds loyalty among MTEC's customers, 80 percent of whom are small-to-mid-sized contractors who rent concrete mixers or scaffolding or backhoes by the day, week or month. "MTEC has everything, in abundance," says Tim King, owner of Tim King Con-

crete in Detroit. "Everybody's nice and friendly, and I know all the guys in back. All I have to do is call them and they'll have it ready for me when I get there."

King, who's been in business for six years, followed the lead of his former employer in renting power buggies, jackhammers, skid-steer loaders, trash pumps, miniexcavators and more from MTEC. He tells of breaking a hydraulic line on a piece of rental equipment. "They sent someone out as soon as I called," he says. And he wasn't charged for the time the machine was down.

That kind of service is what won MTEC the American Rental Association's Best Customer Service Award for the general tool and equipment category in both 1998 and 2000. The association selects three of its member companies each year for the honor.

Now the business has added equipment sales, joining AED last October. With his niche market of start-up contractors, Vanker

found that some of his best rental customers eventually grew big enough to buy their own equipment. "We'd help these guys to the point where they didn't need us any more," Vanker says. "Then they'd go somewhere else to buy the machine."

That didn't make much sense, so MTEC added sales of new and used machines. As the company replaces its rental fleet, customers can buy used equipment from a business they've grown to trust. "We have a mechanical staff that's top-notch, so we can maintain it for them," Vanker says. When the customer is ready to buy new equipment, MTEC can help arrange financing for a growing line of hard-to-find machines. There's even a rent-to-buy program. "We're covering all the bases," he says.

Steve Vanker's father, Dick, founded the business in 1968 under the name Royal Rental. Through high school, Steve worked summers and weekends in the business, which offered party goods as well as general tools. "Later we decided they weren't compatible in the same building," says Steve, recalling mechanics with greasy hands trying to show potential customers dinner plates.

In 1975 the business moved to its current facility, complete with service bays. Steve bought MTEC from his father in 1985. Now his son, 23-year-old Don, serves as outside sales manager. He's one of 18 full-time and two part-time employees on staff.

"We're large enough to give customers the equipment they need and careful enough to give each customer the personal service they deserve," says marketing manager Matt Groen. MTEC employees advise customers on what equipment is best for the job. They provide delivery and pickup service, start each machine that goes out and instruct users on how to operate it.

The company has long rented a full line of construction equipment such as tractors, backhoes, compressors, skid-steer loaders and boom lifts, plus small tools from stud drivers to concrete planers. Landscaping equipment includes tillers, chainsaws, brush chippers and stump cutters, popular among the 20 percent of customers who work on their own homes.

MTEC recently became the Detroit-area distributor for Scat Trak skid-steer loaders and miniexcavators. "We love the way they operate, and they're real easy to work on," Vanker says. "They're new to the Detroit area, so people are interested in them."

Several new lines also are garnering attention from customers. One is Ground Heaters, designed to thaw ground for construction without erecting inefficient

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Midwest Tool & Equipment Center is a family affair. General manager Steve Vanker (pictured here) bought the company from his father, its founder, and Steve's 23-year-old son Don is outside sales manager.

hopper to places where a wheelbarrow won't go.

Then there's the vacuum excavator from Vac-Tron Equipment. Vacuum excavators suck dirt out of holes, thus avoiding the huge fines that can come with accidentally cutting through fiber optic cable by trenching. MTEC didn't even

if they can both do repair work and work the counter," he says. "Then I compensate them more for those abilities."

The firm's mission statement aims for success both for the company and its employees—and success doesn't just mean making money. "I want the staff to grow as individuals," Vanker says. "I want to improve their quality of life." The firm offers a wide range of employee benefits, plus flexible scheduling to allow long weekends, free use of any equipment when the business is closed and a paid day off on their birthdays.

All this could cut into the bottom line, but Vanker doesn't see it that way. "My guys really hustle," he says. "They work really hard."

Indeed, marketing manager Groen notes that while the firm advertises in local trade publications, employees who keep customers satisfied do the real marketing work. "A yellow page ad or something in a trade journal may bring a customer in, but these guys keep them coming back," he says. ■

Jane Easter Bahls is a free-lance writer based in Bexley, Ohio.

heated tents. After laying a system of hoses across the ground and insulating them with Visqueen and blankets, users pump hot polypropylene glycol through the hoses. "This is new technology, fairly new to the Detroit area," Vanker says. "It's something we're excited about. It means contractors can be productive all year round."

Another new machine is the shot blaster, used for resurfacing concrete floors by directing a stream of steel shot to ricochet off the concrete. "There's a lot of demand for it," Vanker says. The same goes for Mayco's concrete pump, which pumps concrete through a hose from the

have to advertise this product. "We just put one in our yard and people came in wanting to rent it," Vanker says.

Rental customers often push equipment to its limit, Vanker notes. "We buy larger, top-of-the-line units so they have fewer problems," he says. "And for rental units we usually buy the deluxe seats. We want our customers to be comfortable."

Keeping such a range of equipment in top form means that MTEC mechanics need a great deal of training. Vanker reimburses employees for their education and, whenever possible, cross-trains them in other parts of the business. "They're more valuable to the company

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