When asked to speak about his company, the first words out of the mouth of Steve M. Sharpe, president of Sharpe Interior Systems, Inc., Los Angeles, are “We’ve been a union drywall company for 25 years.”

Although Sharpe indicates he is simply giving background, the more he speaks, the more it is clear that union activity is the primary thread that runs through his story. This, at least at first, seems unusual. For most business owners in this or any other trade tend to regard unions at best with tolerance, and, at worst, with antagonism. Furthermore, unions have grown considerably weaker than they once were. One reason for this is that government and business have taken over many of the employee benefit packages and provisions for a safe workplace, which were once the purpose of unions. Also, as Sharpe acknowledges, unions had gained the reputation, often
earned, of being “fat cats” out of touch with the reality of the need for management and workers to work together productively to keep a business afloat in these competitive times.

Sharpe’s empathy of unions started early. “My father was a union member in the airlines in the 1950s, so he had to go through the picketing and other situations in which workers had to fight for their jobs,” recalls Sharpe. “I grew up in that culture.”

In high school, Sharpe worked as a box boy in a grocery store, and he belonged to that union. In his senior year, he was approached by a contractor who told him he could make more money doing drywall, which is how he got into this business. “I sort of stumbled into it,” Sharpe says. But, since he was taking shop courses in high school, he was a natural at a job that involved working with his hands. He graduated in 1969, during the Vietnam War, and spent six and a half years in the National Guard while working himself up to journeyman.

“I had ambitions to be a superintendent or to somehow work my way up, but there weren’t any opportunities. So, in 1977, I decided to go into business for myself,” he says. He was 24.

He started working out of the front bedroom of his home, doing jobs that were mostly drywall and metal studs. “My first year in business I grossed only $187,000. After that first year, I signed my first union agreement,” Sharpe says.
“I had always worked for a union company. Since I was the type of person looking for stability in my job, I sought out the same type of employees as I had been myself. I’m a family-type person. From the start I wanted to build those same kinds of long-term relationships with both my employees and clients.”

**Drywall Only**

Sharpe Interior Systems has grown steadily over the past 25 years. Today it brings in $25 million annually, and it is one of the larger drywall contracting companies in this market, which covers the highly populated area from Los Angeles on south to San Diego and north to Santa Barbara. The company’s work is all high-end commercial projects, including department stores, entertainment centers, biomedical facilities, hotels, theaters, domiciles, universities and corporate facilities.

How does Sharpe differentiate his company from his competitors? “We’re one of the larger drywall/fireproofing/plaster-
ing companies, but we concentrate our resources on drywall and metal studs,”

Competitors say his single focus is a weakness compared to their one-stop shopping sales pitch. Sharpe says what they think is his weakness is really his strength says. “We aren’t burdened with unnecessary overhead and multiple department structures. The whole idea of being in business is to put workers on site in an efficient manner. To be most competitive, you need to have an even workflow. You’re participating in the market and choosing your jobs. So you don’t need to hire specialized labor at inopportune times when the market can digest them. Consequently, if you have a number of different operations going, you have to keep them all level.”

In terms of management style, Sharpe says, “I am a drywall contractor who

Sharpe says he’s always jousting with his competitors, who say his single focus is a weakness compared to their one-stop shopping sales-pitch. “But what they call our weakness is really our strength,” he
happens to be a businessman. But I know several other successful owners who happen to be primarily businessmen and who hire drywall expertise.”

So how has Sharpe gotten his business skills? Does he outsource them too, and bring in CPAs, lawyers and other businessmen? No. Sharpe says he’s learned not only from experience but also from his very tight group of employees, most of whom have been with him for many years, especially project managers. In the beginning he learned from friends who were also in business, and early on
Steve Sharpe, president of Sharpe Interior Systems started building close relationships with suppliers who did a lot to help.

**If It Ain’t Broke**

Sharpe sees the past 25 years of success rising from his focus on drywall and his reliance on union labor. He sees the next 25 years in the same terms. And he believes that unions will come to play a greater role in the industry as a whole.

“The changes taking place in the last 10 years are becoming more pronounced right now,” Sharpe says. “The OSHA rules and ergonomic guidelines are becoming reality. And there are all those material safety data sheets . . . then the scaffolding rules. All of this, which had been in the background, is now starting to hit us. Organizations like the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Indus-
in California as well as in other parts of the country, he has served on numerous committees as a management representative negotiating with unions. He also participates on the labor committees of AWCI, and has recently been appointed to a position on the AWCI board of directors.

Sharpe says the entire relationship between business owners and unions is changing dramatically. But it’s still a new phenomenon, and many representatives from both sides still revert to archaic ways of thinking about the other. But all this will change, Sharpe believes, for the current competitive environment will require that they work more closely in concert, both so that businesses can stay profitable, and so workers can have secure, well-paying jobs.

Sharpe also believes unions will have a vital role to play in perhaps the single biggest problem in the industry: attracting and retaining high skilled workers.

“When I was a young person, a plumber or carpenter was respected. Now working in a trade sometimes has a negative connotation. Whether union or non-union, the industry needs to successfully project the ‘Hey, this is a great place to work, and I have a future!’ image. People have to see the jobs offered as having a value. They must say this is something I want for myself, to be a high-skilled/high-paid worker, in a safe environment, with health benefits and a pension to look forward to.

“This can come about in many ways, but I believe that unions represent a systematic way of training and upgrading workers, and making the wall and ceiling industry one that will appeal to young people.”