**DONALD J. CHAMBERS:**
The Benefits of Adapting

By taking an Innovative approach to A unique Marketing area, This Mansfield, Ohio, contractor Has grown steadily

To him, it was a sound business proposition.

Maybe it was a bit new, a bit unique, and maybe it required a little change from traditional thinking.

But it was sound. Any construction company should go for it.

And his boss turned it down.

So, Donald J. Chambers did what any self-respecting third-generation lather would do.

He walked out with his idea—and built a $5,000,000 a year mini-conglomerate construction company with it.

The company, J & B Acoustical, of Mansfield, Ohio, which emerged from the original idea, now serves as the base and parent company for three spin-off organizations: Ohio Construction Services and J & B Plastering, Inc., both of Mansfield, and Construction Systems, Columbus, Ohio.

On what had been a 12-acre corn field on the outskirts of Mansfield, there is now the J & B headquarters complex, a modern industrial park with six major structures accounting for some 87,000 square feet of office and warehouse space.

In addition to the J & B facilities, the company lists as tenants an insurance company, an engineering firm, and a computer school.

And now rising at the far end of the complex, dominating the area, is the new, modern combination office-warehouse that the company will move into soon. Featuring a 24,000 square foot warehouse and 5,000 square feet of office space, the new building is a necessity for an operation whose head strives for a 10 percent growth achievement each year.

It wasn't always that way for the 47-year-old president of J & B Acoustical. As one determined to peg his dreams of business success on the premise that acoustical ceilings represented a profitable wave of the future, his entrepreneurial arrival on the construction scene in 1957 was not exactly heralded.

A lather by trade, he had already spent seven years traveling Ohio and supervising the lathing operation for Knowlton Construction Company, a general contractor based in Bellefontaine, Ohio.

But he wanted more. Yet he knew he had progressed as far as he could with Knowlton, and he literally walked the streets at night hunting answers for his ambition.

More and more, he saw that acousticals—still in their infancy at that time—would begin replacing the traditional lath and plaster ceiling market.

He went to Knowlton with his idea. Set up, he told them, an acoustical department with a young Don Chambers running it.

When they indicated that this was not in their plans, Don went directly to Armstrong who awarded him the area franchise. On June 9, 1957, Don Chambers served notice—and has never looked back.

He and his pert and vivacious wife, the former Jean Boylan, who like her husband is a native of Mansfield, pooled their resources. With $1,100 venture capital from their savings, a pickup truck, a couple of Baker scaffolds and a few planks, J & B Acoustical (the company name is from Jean's initials) was in business. Headquarters consisted of a barn, owned by Jean's father.

The first year in business produced $800 profit after an especially rough initial six months. But from the first job—a small church—he moved to a small store, thanks to a friendly contractor who knew him. After that, other con-

Construction DIMENSIONS
The new headquarters of J & B Acoustical, a 29,000-square foot warehouse-office combination, rises in the background. It will also contain a steel fabricating shop for the company’s new venture into load-bearing steel studs and floor and roof joists.

tractors allowed him to bid their work and the struggling young company started to grow.

The second business year produced $4,500. By 1960, though, he was able to buy the 12-acre corn field and erect a 4,000 square foot warehouse-office. He has been adding to the complex ever since.

And he has also been innovating ever since, constantly thinking out and adapting his company’s goals to the specific business and industry conditions of a non-metropolitan market.

Generally, on a new business venture he creates a new corporation, not only for the obvious tax advantage but primarily to isolate the risk from the parent company. And because he is a true practitioner of selecting good people for key positions and then practicing hands-off management, the new companies quickly develop into viable profit centers on their own.

As his business volume and companies have grown, so too has Don’s level of contributions to industry and civic affairs. He is the Second Vice President of the iaWCC, after serving last year as its Treasurer and Chairman of the association’s Budget Committee.

Prior to his election “into the chairs,” he had served three years as a member of the Board of Directors, and has been Chairman of iaWCC’s Carpenters’ Liaison Committee for the past several years. In addition, Don spent three years on the association’s “long range planning committee,” known officially as the iaWCC Continuing Study Council.

Typical of the way he does things, he served on the Continuing Study Council as Vice Chairman and then as Chairman. And if all goes in accordance with the customary iaWCC officer-system, he will be national President in 1977.

Don is also a member of the Ohio Contractors Association and is chairman of the negotiating committee for the carpenters and painters. Other activities include serving on the local Red Cross board of directors and the advisory board of the Richland Trust Bank, in Mansfield.

That Don would make a career in the construction industry is not surprising. He is the son of the late Arthur J. Chambers, a lather, and the grandson of a lather. Three uncles were also lathers.

Don’s mother, Hazel, is retired now and living in Jacksonville, Fla., a location that is totally acceptable to her son who admits frankly that in getting away periodically he prefers the “Sunny South” or anywhere else that “will support a palm tree.”

As an instrument rated pilot, the company’s twin-engined Cessna 310 is always available and when (Continued on Page 20)
not in use for business purposes it has a happy role for a contractor who openly admires long week-ends.

In addition to flying, Don and his wife enjoy ice boating and sailing. Until recently, Don and Jean were an effective team in racing 14-foot Jets on Charles Mills Lake with the Mohican Sailing Club. They were district champions and competed in the nationals at Red Bank, N. J., but today most of the sail boat racing is done by son Michael. Michael is president of Ohio Construction Services and also functions as a salesman-estimator for J & B Acoustical. Don and Jean also have a daughter, Elaine, whose husband, Kenneth Navratil, is a salesman with the Columbus company. There are two grandchildren.

The Chambers live in a huge, sprawling ranch-type home atop a hill near the company complex. Mike and his family live nearby. But for all his commitments, the hub of activity is still in his well-appointed office at J & B headquarters. The quiet hum of activity and growth permeates the complex. And amid it all, Don Chambers still found time to talk to CONSTRUCTION DIMEN- SIONS, about the company’s past, present, and future.

DIMENSIONS: As the son of a lather, the grandson of a lather, and an experienced lather yourself, why did you see acousticals as the basis of your own business?

CHAMBERS: I was being quite serious when I said I walked the streets in search of something to do. In any business decision—if it’s going to be a sound one—you simply must analyze what the conditions are.

You have to analyze the market carefully. It may sound oversimplified, but if the market is covered there’s not much opportunity. If it isn’t covered, you have a good chance going in.

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With acousticals, I got a sort of instinctive, or gut, feeling about it. The material was certainly an innovation at that time. It was acoustical, it was clean, and it was fast. And no one was doing it in the area. I just felt it was a natural and that it would take over traditional lath and plaster ceilings within a short time. And it did to a great extent.

DIMENSIONS: Not only did you deliberately launch yourself into a new service, but you were a traveling contractor from the start. Many contractors avoid traveling because of control factors. What prompted you to go against the trend here, too?

CHAMBERS: Well, personally and historically I have always traveled. I was acquainted with the problems that a contractor encounters in traveling so I was familiar with the rules of the game.

But basically, that decision came from knowing the market. A metropolitan contractor doesn’t have to travel to secure work; it’s there right in his own area. But our company is in a non-metropolitan area, and if the organization is to grow we’ve got to travel. Many communities don’t have the services that we provide so we travel throughout Ohio as well as to other locations.

As it is with any other contractor, we’ve had to structure our organization, to set it up in a manner that will accommodate the special marketing conditions we face.

DIMENSIONS: You spoke of being familiar with the rules of the game for a traveling contractor. Just what are some of these rules?

CHAMBERS: I think the first thing is to acknowledge that the union representatives with whom you’re dealing are really no different from local representatives, nor is one city that much different. The only real difference is the time it takes to travel to these other areas.

As for rules, a contractor should call the business agent before he even starts a job in the BA’s area: He should know and understand his own rights as well as the rights of the business agent in a particular area—and the contractor should have no hesitancy about demand-
The national agreements with the various unions are the best thing that iaWCC has ever done, because a contractor has quick recourse to the international office which can resolve those little problems that sometimes crop up because of an over-zealous business agent.

**DIMENSIONS:** In a situation such as yours, the development of wide area bargaining would be a decided advantage, wouldn’t it?

**CHAMBERS:** Yes, but wide-area bargaining is growing very painfully because some locals don’t want to lose their separate identity. It will take effort on both sides.

Many contractors complain about what unions do to them and yet they aren’t involved at all in the negotiations. Over the years we’ve developed a rapport with the unions and their members—and we’re involved in negotiating. Why let someone else do it for you? It’s your own responsibility to decide your own destiny.

We want to improve the situation for everyone concerned because we’re union contractors and we intend to remain that way as long as practical and feasible. Somebody is going to do the work; we intend to be that somebody.

**DIMENSIONS:** In addition to the manpower problem, there is the challenge of control on a distant job. How does J & B plan for this?

**CHAMBERS:** As I mentioned, we’ve structured ourselves for the situation. And we make a concerted effort to get checks and balances within the system so it can function.

Because quick deliveries often present a problem in a non-metropolitan area such as ours we deliberately carry a significantly larger inventory than do most contractors so we can make deliveries direct from our warehouse.

When a delivery is made to the job, the driver has a form which must be filled out by the job foreman and then returned to the office. The form indicates the time of arrival, what functions the driver performed at the job, what materials are being returned from the job to the warehouse, and the time of departure. It’s an excellent time control.

As for tools and equipment, we maintain control by using a magnetic board. The tools, with identification numbers etched in, are assigned to a foreman and his name, project, and whatever tools are involved go to onto the magnetic board.

We have symbols for equipment, such as the Baker scaffolds, and these are listed under the jobs to which they’re assigned so we know where they are and how many. And every effort is made to keep the magnetic board current.

**DIMENSIONS:** How do you go about making certain you have the right people on any particular job?

**CHAMBERS:** Oh, our foremen are the key to our success. I personally visit less than 10 percent of the jobs we do, and at least 70 per-

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CHAMBERS:

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cent of the work is never even visited by our field superintendent.
When you put people out there and inspect only 30 percent of the work that has to say something about the quality of the people in the field. The best comments come from the general contractors and customers. Our people really move—and because they move the customers are happy.

Office Manager Doyal Sears assigns the foreman to the job. And then the estimator-salesman who birddogs a job, takes it off, and then closes it, goes over the complete mandate with the foreman. This review includes a copy of the take-off, any special problems that might arise, and if an interior system is involved, a coding key and copies of the color coded prints.

Our foremen select the people they want on a job, and I think this is very important. By naming his own personnel, the foreman and crew become responsible for bringing that job in according to the mandate the foreman accepts.

We keep track of every foreman’s performance on every job and this, of course, helps us to determine accurately which jobs fit him best.

When a job is completed, we send a postage paid return card, asking the customer to comment on our performance. These comments are used to upgrade our organization. If you want to find the weak points in your organization, go ask the customer. He’ll tell you.

DIMENSIONS: At what point do you personally come into the management stream under such a setup?

CHAMBERS: Once the job is started, I come in. Doyal and I go over the computerized management report summaries of every job on Friday mornings. We select those jobs where some attention is required and I’ll get involved personally if necessary although Doyal has the feel of the job long before the report comes out.

As for pricing, I haven’t put a price on anything since I can’t remember when. And it’s deliberate. This organization will go on after me and I want it to function effectively with or without any single individual.

You know, there’s no such thing as a self-made man. He doesn’t really exist. And what’s here is the result of other people, people like Sears, my son Mike, Lowell Hershner, who handles sales in the northern partition of Ohio, our Chief Estimator Dick Conley, who handles major projects, and Don Morgan, who has all area sales responsibility along with floor covering.

My function is to plan and control, of course, but once a year we review these goals and try to match up the company’s direction with that of the people here. Thus, when they achieve their goals, the company achieves its goals, too. Achieving the goals of the people who work with me is uppermost.

“One thing is certain. You can’t stand still. You have to continue growing.”

We have profit sharing in all our organizations—there’s $500,000 in the program right now—and this will enable our people to retire with dignity and a nice nest egg. I think that’s vital, too.

DIMENSIONS: As the head of an already well-diversified organization, where do you see future trends and opportunities coming in the industry?

CHAMBERS: The day of the one- and two-service contractor is behind us. I feel there is an increasing demand for the single responsibility contractor, one who can offer the total package.

We’re gearing up right now to get into the load bearing steel stud and stud roof and floor market. I think that’s the biggest growth area. Integrated ceilings, another combination system, is another good growth area, and perhaps we’ll look to a sub so we can offer ceramic tile.

One thing is certain. You can’t stand still. You have to continue growing—and we’re looking for our usual 10 percent growth a year.