Success to This Cincinnati Contractor is Mixing Innovation With Tough Minded Management

While others in the construction industry are struggling to hold on to what they have, waiting for the return of 'business as usual,' Jim Brunemann is pushing forward—adapting, changing and inventing to meet the demands of today's market.

Jim Brunemann is the President of R. B. Brunemann and Son, Inc. of Cincinnati, an exciting, innovative company whose yearly volume reaches well into the $10 million a year range. During the last 4 years of the so-called recession, the company has expanded to show a net gain of between 20 to 30 percent in business volume.

Brunemann feels the reason for the company's success can be attributed to the fact that it is geared to change with the times . . . to experiment . . . to diversify . . . to start trends and not to follow them.

His zest for the future was inherited from his father, Robert, the founder of the firm and president until his retirement in 1960. Robert taught all his sons that in order to keep ahead of the times one must think in the third dimension—to visualize what you want to accomplish before undertaking the task.

Brunemann obtained a business management degree while attending Xavier University and Ohio State University, before moving on to graduate courses at Georgia State University. His strong business background is easily evident in his construction management philosophy.

There are a total of five Brunemann brothers working within the firm. Albert, is the Executive Vice President and handles the lath and plastering division. Richard is the Vice President and Treasurer and heads the flooring division. Robert is the Secretary and General Superintendent and Roy is a superintendent of the acoustical division.

Always willing to diversify into new market areas, the firm operates seven systems at present, which include: drywall and moveable partitions, lath & plastering, flooring, acoustical ceilings, fireproofing and in-
The spectrum of services offered by Jim Brunemann and his company demands careful planning and rechecking.

sulation, exterior curtain walls and light gauge steel framing.

The manufacturing and prefabrication of exterior curtain wall and steel framing systems has been a love and pre-occupation of Jim Brunemann for many years and is an important part in the company's enormous success. Brunemann possesses over 10 patents with the government and has applied for several more on equipment that he has designed and built to perform specific prefab functions.

His expertise and knowledge of the new and exciting field of light gauge steel framing is held in high esteem by not only his colleagues in the wall and ceiling industry but by manufacturers and architects alike.

Many area developers and contractors have begun to rely on R. B. Brunemann & Son, Inc. for the purchase of preassembled steel panels, which the company manufactures.

With all of this the 48 year old Brunemann still finds time for his family, which consists of his wife Joan and their six children. His two oldest daughters are married and his third girl, Connie, works for the company as a receptionist and secretary. The three boys are all still in school and are looking forward to working with their father one day.

When Construction Dimensions first approached Jim Brunemann with the idea of an interview, he was hesitant, not wanting to blow his own horn. But as soon as he was made aware of the fact that this was to be a steeling framing issue he was more than happy to help.

DIMENSIONS: Jim, has your business management background aided you in the wall and ceiling industry?

BRUNEMANN: Yes, but I feel there is a very complex inter-relationship between construction technology and business management, and I feel one should try to define that relationship as it relates to his business and its ultimate goals. So often contractors lose sight of this relationship.

DIMENSIONS: As you see it, what are the different business management divisions?

BRUNEMANN: They are administration, estimating and engineering, operations, sales and promotion, marketing and research and development. Operations is where we make our money. That's where the profits are realized provided that our flow of equipment and materials and productivity is at the level or better than we estimated it. But this is not to say that operations is the most important aspect of any business. I would say that R & D and marketing have probably aided us more than any other during this recent down market.

DIMENSIONS: And yet sales, promotion, marketing, research and development are usually the first budget items to be cut during a recession.

BRUNEMANN: I understand this is true probably because it doesn't make sense spending money on a dead market. But, research and development is important in developing the technique of present product lines and the development of new techniques with new products.

As we have developed techniques, such as; prefabrication of steel framing, it was important through marketing, sales and promotion to exploit our concepts. This has enabled our business to grow during the down trend. I feel that our industry, because of its high labor ratio to its sales dollar, can and will develop the product lines and techniques to make it a stronger industry.

DIMENSIONS: Do you have your own research area?

BRUNEMANN: When we do specific testing of a product we use several local testing laboratories. We do, though, have an area in one of our warehouses designated for research and development.

At times, when a particular operation or a new piece (Continued on Page 20)

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of equipment needs to be analyzed, we do so in this area. Each step is recorded on a portable TV camera so we can review its steps and analyze such things as time studies and technology.

DIMENSIONS: All your innovative planning and research is great, but you still have to educate your customers, don’t you?

BRUNEMANN: Our marketing is directed toward the architect and developer. We went to great extent to compose an informative and attractive brochure that expresses our technique.

Recently we held an Architectural Seminar with a major steel manufacturer on light gage steel stud framing for more than 50 Architects in our area. From this seminar we have 6 jobs that are presently being switched over to light gage steel framing with thin cast concrete, in lieu of the masonry or pre-cast concrete originally designed. We also have about 5 jobs ranging from one story to four story for light gage steel framing.

I would say that this success is contributed to Research and Development, marketing and Sales & Promotion, along with the joint efforts of Inryco, who helped put on this seminar.

DIMENSIONS: Your company is heavily committed to steel framing. Where do you see steel framing as a market in, let’s say, the next 10 years?

BRUNEMANN: It is extremely difficult to run a marketing analysis in our industry, particularly as a contractor since we do not have those resources.

But, it is the general thinking of steel manufacturers that steel framing will not reach its total potential for 15 years. This means that this market is on a steady increase and will not become level for 15 years. I feel that the rise in the steel framing industry will be quicker.

DIMENSIONS: Is there really a steel framing boom?

BRUNEMANN: As I indicated earlier, it has not reached its peak but it is rising. The present demands for saving energy, better fire rating, and speed of erection are going to be more demanding in the future. Steel framing is the most likely ingredient to meet those demands.

DIMENSIONS: Over the years you’ve gotten the reputation of being a pioneer and expert in the steel framing field and in prefabrication. What initially propelled you into this area?

BRUNEMANN: My father was prefabricating with channel iron and metal lath during the depression and
he claimed it saved his business. So through the years we were always looking for ways to prefabricate, not to save our business but to improve our techniques, productivity, and profit.

Prefabrication of steel framing and curtain wall seemed an excellent way to make a profit and control our destiny. Since prefabrication is done within a controlled environment, it has helped us to produce a quality product at a faster rate.

**DIMENSIONS:** Mention prefabrication to the public and visions of assembly lines, mobile homes and cheapness pop into their minds. How do you combat this?

**BRUNEMANN:** For the most part, we are not dealing with a consumer product, but rather a technique to produce an end product with better quality control, and speed of erection.

The prudent architect, the developer, or contractor, once the story is told, realizes that he is getting a better product with many cost savings. You have to realize that these people are experts and they realize the advantages of prefabrication over stick building.

**DIMENSIONS:** How much and what kind of help can a contractor reasonably expect from the steel manufacturers?

**BRUNEMANN:** In my opinion, he can expect fantastic help. The manufacturers belonging to the Metal Lath/Steel Framing Association not only offer help but ask you to ask for it. These manufacturers have been exposed, for some time, in prefabrication and erection of steel framing and are willing to assist any sincere contractor who wants to get into the steel framing industry.

**DIMENSIONS:** In what form does this help come?

**BRUNEMANN:** I believe for the most part, manufacturers are willing to help the contractor in the design engineering, drafting, and shop drawings. Some will also aid in the initial planning, figuring and estimating, although I feel this is a function of the contractor.

Nothing would please a manufacturer more than a sincere call for assistance. Some contractors, however, do not realize the benefits of prefabrication. It forces a contractor to preplan each operation of the job. You would be surprised how much money a little preplanning can save.

**DIMENSIONS:** Have you had any delivery problems?

**BRUNEMANN:** For the most part, delivery schedules have never really given us much of a problem. A manufacturer who can deliver in 3 days is no better or worse than a manufacturer who delivers in two weeks, provided he accomplishes what he says he can do. One must plan accordingly, and problems arise only when the delivery schedule is not adhered to.

**DIMENSIONS:** With the present cost of steel roughly equal to wood, will the continued steel price increases take the competit-
tive edge away from steel framing?

BRUNEMANN: If one considers wood as the only competitive factor, steel framing on some types of building is still more economical. Consider the fact that steel stud framing is used on load bearing partitions, and drywall studs are used on nonload bearing partitions which in fact are cheaper than wood. With the right combination of this steel framing concept it has a competitive edge over wood.

The wood industry, of course, uses 2 x 4's throughout. But wood is not the only product that this industry is competing against. Fire ratings, energy and speed of erection are also cost saving techniques within this system. Consider also the masonry and pre-cast concrete industries, against which the steel framing can economically compete.

It might also be well to point out that it took 20-25 years for the wood industry to develop into what we see today and I speak specifically of prefabrication. The technique and development of the wood industry changed drastically over these years.

It is not going to take this long for the steel framing industry to develop its technique. I expect its progress to be at a much more rapid rate.

**DIMENSIONS: What steps would you recommend to a contractor just entering the steel framing market?**

BRUNEMANN: Many aggressive contractors have diversified their business, let’s say from plastering to ceilings to drywall and so forth. Maybe not in that order, but they did in fact go into other businesses. In the beginning, I am sure they were not experts in their new operations. Making this learning transition from novice to expert, they apparently were willing to pay the tuition price. I would assume then, that a contractor should be willing to pay that price to get his feet wet.

It would seem to me that he might want to build some mock-up partitions to gain knowledge and develop a few techniques in order that he may be more capable of bidding a small steel framing job.

After he initially takes on the task of a few small jobs, I am sure he will develop the techniques and costing necessary, to develop another division within his company. This is fact, is what he has been doing for some time. Many contractors to whom I have talked seem to fear shop drawings, welding, prefabrication, and the application of light gage steel framing structural walls. Aggressive contractors have been facing these fears all their construction lives, but have adapted themselves to those challenges and have successfully built their business on diversification.

**DIMENSIONS: So basically you suggest first getting your feet wet?**

BRUNEMANN: What other way is there to do it?

I believe that manufacturers are willing to help the contractor if the contractor wants to help himself. The architects have a reasonably good idea on the engineering involved.

Also I feel that iaWCC/GDCI can be invaluable in keeping a contractor headed in the right direction. His initial cost may be a little high in the beginning, but that will go down quickly and profits should go up.

Aggressive contractors are basically innovative people and it will not take them long to develop their technique and improve their profit picture with light gage steel framing.