Go Commercial, Young Man

Ohio’s Jim Oren Followed a Customer’s Advice—And Has Been Booming Since

To Ohio’s Jim Oren, contracting and farming have only one thing in common.

They’re both 7-days-a-week professions—but you can make a living out of contracting. The same can’t always be said of small farming.

Jim is now President of James C. Oren & Associates, a $2,000,000-a-year diversified wall and ceiling construction firm in Dayton, Ohio. Straight out of Dayton’s Randolph High School he had wanted to become a farmer.

Since the eighth grade in school he had farmed on his father’s farm and it was a natural and desirable turn. He even went to Garrett, Indiana, with his wife to work his own farm.

Two years later he was convinced that farming wouldn’t and couldn’t produce a living despite the effort. So, he returned to Dayton, worked a short time as a bulk milk hauler before making the career turning point which took him into the residential house building industry as a carpenter trainee.

When his father, who had been a plastering contractor, went back into the business, Jim apprenticed out to the plastering trades. Thus, starting at age 22, he never looked back, eventually took over his father’s business in 1953, and swung into the commercial end of the business in 1961.

Born in Dayton, Jim is married to the former Betty K. Sanders, of Dayton, who was his high school classmate. They are the parents now of five children: James, Jr., who works for his father’s firm and is studying in an electronics school; Carol, who lives in Brussels with her U.S. Army husband; Roger, a systems analyst for the company; Kenneth, the company’s estimator who is being groomed to take over, and Jeannette, a payroll clerk for the company.

Jim’s father, Ira A. Oren, who went into the ministry when he retired from construction, lives now with his wife, Ruth Engle Oren, in retirement in the Dayton area.

As for Jim Oren, the sprawling Dryvit exterior paneled headquarters building in suburban Dayton with its 22,500 square feet of space represents a better growing situation than the fields of wheat that once enslaved—and starved—him.

The Oren operation moved into its new headquarters this past February, the third move for the company that started with $25,000 annual gross in his home in 1953.

An open shop residential contractor until the recession of 1961, Jim made the shift to commercial and to union status as an act of survival. The recession wiped out the residential business in the Dayton area, and the union only could provide the skilled manpower to handle the steel lath that commercial work demanded.

Three years later—long before the rest of the industry caught up—Jim went into a diversification program. He took up ceiling tile and drywall and then added steel framing, fire-proofing, exterior coatings, cement plaster, and Dryvit. Lately, Jim has been de-emphasizing tile and drywall.

Evidence of this ability to see and Continued on page 24
react promptly to emerging trends can be found in the HVAC system developed for his new headquarters building. It is virtually free of the energy crises.

The building is a geothermal-energized system, both for air conditioning and for heating. Two deep wells, with a constant water supply of 52°, provides all the cooling and heating the building needs.

Cooling is provided by blowing air over the chilled coils and into the conditioned areas. A heat exchanger pulls required heat from the water and then returns the water to the well still above the freezing level.

Only in a rare emergency does supplementary heat have to be provided.

Because he felt a need to promote lath and plaster, Jim joined iaWCC in 1965. A firm supporter of industry approaches, Jim now serves on the national Technical Committee's Steel Framing subcommittee and the national Labor Liaison Committee's Plastering Section.

He is a past president of the local American Subcontractors Association chapter, a past board member of the Dayton Builder’s Exchange, a charter member of the Dayton Construction Specifiers Institute chapter, a well as a member of the AGC, and the U.S. Power Squadron. He’s also active in the Church of the Brethren.

When not in pursuit of a construction project, Jim can be found—at least on weekends—piloting his 28-foot Marinette power boat on Lake Erie and making a determined try for a Walleye. A navigation enthusiast, he holds a JN rating.

DIMENSIONS: Does this represent a different way of doing business ... the sell vs. bid options?
OREN: The selling function is becoming much more important in all areas of construction ... steel framing certainly is no exception. Half of my time these days is spent with architects and engineers in promoting work.

More and more our bids are merely preliminary with the attitude of everyone, of ‘how can we save on this.’

DIMENSIONS: You’re not saying you don’t bid anymore, are you?

OREN: No, you must still bid the job ... even after you’ve sold it. That’s true, I’d say, in most cases, and frankly, I’ve lost a few I’ve sold. But that’s construction: you lose some, you win some. I just want my share.

DIMENSIONS: How do you see the fuel/energy syndrome affecting your company—and the industry?
OREN: The energy situation will promote steel framing and retrofit. Steel can provide an economical wall, a quality wall, and it’ll go up 12 months out of the year.

Owners and designers, of course, have their traditional preferences, but today the energy conservation factor forces a total systems performance consideration. A wall these days simply has to work rather than serve as a mere enclosure.

As contractors we still need to build space separators, but that wall or partition has to do some work, too.

DIMENSIONS: What direct involvement does the wall and ceiling contractor have? How does this change the game for him?
OREN: Owners and designers want us more as consultants today. The modern contractor will need to talk the R and U factor vocabulary. Not only must he be able to talk it; he must understand it because he is needed to advise on combining construction practicalities and theory.

Contracting is getting more interesting now because a contractor is becoming part of the design team. He has information to contribute.

DIMENSIONS: Buildings are getting lighter, too, aren’t they?
OREN: Lighter, easier to handle, more flexible. There are many changes—and most for the better.

Polystyrene as a construction material has really taken off, thanks in large part to Dryvit. The panels are lighter, and they require less in the way of structural support. This all translates into economy.

DIMENSIONS: Where are the problem areas? Every system has them.
OREN: The biggest danger is in not designing from a total systems standpoint. You can’t very successfully graft one system onto another and expect to maximize savings.

In many cases, a switchover is necessary—and designers are notorious for their reluctance to redesign. Furthermore, the contractor should go into the system as a complete installer... not on a piecemeal or part-of-the-action bidder.

DIMENSIONS: The design profession, though, is coming on quite fast, isn’t it?
OREN: Yes. They see the advantages. But the contractor should understand that the architect or engineer is cautious, for obvious reasons, of the new, the inexperienced. And especially so in a low bidder situation.

In our own case, we’ve helped on educational matters in such new concepts as load, stress, shear. As a matter of fact, we’ve done several design jobs with our own engineering staff and then got it reviewed, approved, and stamped. The better the designers understand the technology the better the communications—and the better job we can produce.

DIMENSIONS: The national AWCI Technical Committee is moving ahead with efforts to standardize. How vital do you feel this need is?
OREN: Some bad failures—and I have not seen any so far—can quickly take the polish off this market. Consequently, standards of vital importance such as acceptability for straightness, clarity on the color code painting for gages, stud widths, and uniformity.

Many manufacturers are striving for proprietary standards and we need industry conformity.

Continued on next page
DIMENSIONS: Getting away from steel framing, Jim, how do you feel about the need for computers in the small contractor’s office.
OREN: The first thing you need—long before you buy hardware—is someone with interest and capability, one who can produce programs for YOUR company. We had a bad experience with canned programs.
DIMENSIONS: Do you feel that a computer can’t provide the subjective “feel” so necessary in contracting?
OREN: There’s a lot to the value of instinct. You can walk a job and get a feel of it.

My son Roger is our systems analyst and he’s putting together the programs that we want and need. But I believe in letting instinct handle what it should—and using a properly programmed computer where it’ll contribute.
DIMENSIONS: Change orders? How do you handle this constant problem?
OREN: As a policy, we don’t do change orders without a written order. As a practical matter, if we know the individual assigning or requesting the work verbally we’ll do it.

Our field superintendent, Jim Duckett, handles field changes and he’s not been burned yet. But the main thing is those ‘walking specs’ that you must be careful of.
DIMENSIONS: You’re one of the few contractors to pull out of drywall—at least to deemphasize—while others are rushing to get into it. Why?
OREN: Profits. That’s the answer. I went into drywall and ceiling tile in the 60s when the industry went that way.

Then everyone came along and the profits went away. We still do drywall but we just don’t promote it as much.

I’ve never been one to say that plastering is coming back. I simply don’t think it’s ever gone away; contractors just stopped promoting it.
Drywall has been sold—and sold successfully—as the most economical wall system. There is a big cost difference. But in many cases these days veneer is approaching drywall in cost and surpassing it in speed of application.

DIMENSIONS: I notice you have an ornamental casting operation?
OREN: I bought out the casting operation of another company, and it’s been quite successful for us. This additional capability further confirms customer attitudes towards us as a complete contractor, one that gives service and installation in all areas.

DIMENSIONS: How do you promote? By that, what is the technique you use to make others aware and familiar with your business and its abilities?
OREN: I follow a 3-ring binder approach. We make up our jobs complete with descriptions and photographs and these are placed in binders which I carry around to my customers and review with them.

I tend to promote heavily on a personal basis.

DIMENSIONS: As a final question, Jim, where do you see the wall and ceiling industry five years from now?
OREN: I think our speciality will get more heavily involved in systems constructions such as construction management, fast tracking, accelerated scheduling, negotiated work, and some new systems approaches such as Dryvit and steel framing.

I don’t see any abrupt, radical changes. To me, they seem like they’ll be continuous over the period with a sense of acceleration, that is, we’ll have less time to mull over a change in our company profile or policy; we’ll have forced on us quicker reaction time.

All in all, it should be an interesting five years.