Kentucky’s Ben Hogancamp

As part of the new wave in the wall and ceiling industry, this contractor uses marketing strategy and computers to remain competitive.

Not without good reason did the Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries-International select him as its Outstanding Young Member two years ago, and not without additional good reason did he become the chief executive officer of the Lassiter Plaster Company even before that.

He’s 38-year-old Ben T. Hogancamp, president of the Lassiter Plaster Company, Inc. in Murray, KY and the individual who has had a large responsibility in strengthening the company’s diversified base and shifting its marketing approach from the traditional bid contractor to one of marketing and promotion.

Quick to sense the change in construction over the past ten years, Hogancamp is positioning the fourth generation company to take advantage of the new, emerging approach to construction. And he’s not new to the business. Every summer since his 15th birthday, he’d worked in construction, starting as a laborer and moving up to plaster tender, culminating in a three-year lather apprenticeship.

Before Lynn Lassiter turned the presidency over to his field trained college educated son-in-law (Ben also has a business degree from Murray State), both Lynn and Ben had started taking steps to compensate for plastering’s decline. Today, the company offers lathing and plastering, drywall, acoustical ceilings, demountable partitions, fireproofing, prefabricated interior and exterior panels, light gauge and load bearing steel.

Born in Murray, the son of Dr. Thomas B. and Helen Hogancamp, vice president of administrative affairs and dietician at Murray State University, respectively, Ben attended Murray on a football scholarship as a middle guard and fullback. When a knee injury ended his football career, he shifted to tennis and quickly achieved championship calibre, winning many tournaments in his age group.

A hitch with the U.S. Navy saw him complete Officers Candidate School in Newport, RI, then the University of Georgia supply officers’ school. From there, he served 14 months in Vietnam followed by a pleasant challenge and
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goals are always to get the best and newest products to the market as quickly as possible. The best way to do that is through a fast, aggressive marketing strategy. The keys to marketing are getting the products first, getting them out to the market first, and then getting the advertising behind them. If you do those things, sales will follow.

experience with the Navy’s retail operation that had him seriously considering the Navy as a career in 1972.

Married to Andrea Lassiter and the father of two children, Ben toyed with several job offers but finally accepted the opportunity—and a part of the business— with Lassiter. It’s been a fast ride ever since.

In AWCI, Hogancamp serves as chairman of the prestigious Publications Committee and on the AWCI Board of Directors. He has served as chairman of the Exterior Insulation Technical Subcommittee and the Southeast Conference.

With Lassiter, he teams up with Richard Knight to form a strong management team for a company that seems destined to continual growth. When CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS caught up with the fast-moving Hogancamp, he was relaxing on the back patio of his large, rambling rancher type home, a place where Ben often retreats to think, plan, and get the special work projects done that cannot be accomplished in an office setting.

DIMENSIONS: Ben, you mentioned that you believe in the ethic of hard work, that a lot of your competitors are just as smart or smarter than you but you work harder. I wonder if you’d explain that?

HOGANCAMP: It really doesn’t need much explanation. I’m willing to work harder than my competitors. Mentally, I know I’m not that much better than the other fellow, but I do work harder.

DIMENSIONS: And the time element? That’s part of your equation too, I take it?

HOGANCAMP: Absolutely. By the time my competitor has arrived at his office at a respectable hour, I’ve already gotten 3-4 hours of quality work in. We have all become a slave to the telephone and early A.M. is my time of day to perform productive work.

DIMENSIONS: You’ve also referred to the marketing shift in the construction industry and how the Lassiter company is responding in step to this transition. Do you keep the con-
struction and the marketing components separated?

HOGANCAMP: Well, everything is interrelated. I came into this business like most everyone else, through the production door. Lynn was just then moving solidly into fabrication. I got into welding, fabrication and erecting immediately and then eased into estimating, project management and general management.

Now, most of my management time is devoted to marketing and the promotion of this business. Richard Knight, who is a principal in the firm, is one of the best production men in the business and with each of us backstopping the other, we can devote our time and energy to the area we do best. He handles the field with complete autonomy utilizing his background as a journeyman plasterer.

DIMENSIONS: Why the sudden shift? Why are you coming down so heavily on promotion and marketing?

HOGANCAMP: The shift isn’t sudden or abrupt and we’re not down playing the importance of bidding. But a decided shift has taken place.

Once a job is put out for bid, nearly anyone can meet the specifications so the profitability of the job goes down. In order for our company to maintain an adequate margin on a job we simply must get in earlier . . . in the design stage.

We now offer engineering assistance plus consulting on the best installation procedures. In the past, the manufacturers actually did the lobbying—

DIMENSIONS: —lobbying?

HOGANCAMP: Sure, lobbying. Obviously, the manufacturer was neutral as to who did the job. If a job has five bidders you can’t get too excited over the profit potential. We want the project with high technology where our competitors can’t follow and the rewards to match. We go now to the manufacturer for technical information, but we do our own marketing.

Furthermore, everyone makes out better doing it this way—the customer, the manufacturer, and the contractor.

DIMENSIONS: Then you sell the job and turn it over to the organization—while you go birddogging again?

HOGANCAMP: Essentially, yes, but keep in mind that you must have an entire organization behind you with each component knowing fully what the others are doing. This organization has professionals in estimating, office management, outside sales, and as I previously mentioned in production with Richard. Lynn Lassiter, for example, likes to make job inspections and stay close to the logistics of a job, to be a one man operation. He enjoyed that. Nowadays I’m not involved in
that: I can do it, but I focus on where my time can best be spent in the interests of the business. That’s marketing.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s review what is involved in transitioning a company from a bidding, essentially one-service operation, to one where the marketing concept and management segmentation is involved. How do you go about a so-called image change?

HOGANCAMP: You make a decision to shift the company to fit the new role: that means going from an old line plastering company to a full line, diversified company capable of providing the whole package. And that whole package means to include design and construction assistance as well as performing the work.

You also must re-align the company to go from private and public bid work to accommodate a more aggressive marketing stance.

DIMENSIONS: You mentioned that Dryvit came along, or rather coincided, with your decision to sell the work more?

HOGANCAMP: In 1976, I took a look at Dryvit and was convinced that it was a big wave in the future. We started moving into it despite some organizational resistance because it offered insulation qualities, ease and speed in application, flexibility and a non-cracking surface.

Events since then have demonstrated that the exterior wall system was indeed an innovation whose time has come—but it often needs to be sold aggressively. The additional benefits of this move allowed us to marry the system with steel, so it’s easy to see why exterior systems have become a focal point for us.

DIMENSIONS: As for the future, Ben, what trends do you foresee?

HOGANCAMP: Exterior insulated systems and steel represent substantial income producers for this company. At the current speed of technology I’d have to say that our bread and butter in 10 years probably isn’t even on the market now.

The key to any good marketing strategy is: get in on the early stages and ride it out. A market cycle doesn’t last that long these days and once competitors get in on the bonanza, it quickly ceases to be a bonanza. Margins decrease, competition whittles down the profit line and the whole system slides into becoming a commodity item.

When the crowd sees it, your opportunities are diminished.

DIMENSIONS: So you get a move on again, is that it?

HOGANCAMP: I’m watching right now for the next, new system. We’re looking at metal panels and some other techniques and systems. There are a number of good, new products in the introductory phase right now, ones that bear watching.

DIMENSIONS: Without giving too much away, what are some of these new potential profit makers?

HOGANCAMP: I’ve already men-
tioned metal panels. Some new, interesting ceramic tile systems on metal are available for light gauge framing systems.

That could possibly allow us to provide a complete enclosure package. We already include windows in our panels and we ship the panels complete with these windows and glass, caulking, sealants, flashing—the whole thing.

DIMENSIONS: So you’re reaching for the entire wall system, interior and exterior?

HOGANCAMP: Why not? Unit wall responsibility is where it is. With our responsibility for the entire wall comes risk and liability, but risk means opportunity, doesn’t it? That’s what contracting is all about.

DIMENSIONS: To sustain that kind of high technology response you have to be careful about your management and work force. They have to be tops. What has your company done to assure a quality work force?

HOGANCAMP: That was one of my first and major concerns, because the worst thing you can do is promise and not be able to perform. We have a solid core of about 40 employees with the ability to expand easily to 150.

They’re the key: without them we’d go nowhere. We pay top wages and then include premiums way above what most other contractors offer. We can do this because of the productivity levels we achieve.

There’s a strong work ethic in this part of the country. When you couple that with top supervisory talents, then you can achieve what was have: record high productivity.

Profit sharing is in place here and many of our younger employees will ultimately have a fabulous income at age 60. With the uncertainty of many union pension plans these days, that’s an important item for many people.

DIMENSIONS: At a time when growth is so spotty in the wall and ceiling industry, where is your company headed? Are you on the upside of the curve?

HOGANCAMP: We have no complaints. New people are coming to us, we’ve expanded our computer services and are considering hiring an additional estimator. We’re growing, but we’re doing it with discipline, as a part of the overall strategy. That’s what hard work will give you.

We have about 30,000 square feet in warehousing and office space in our headquarters facility and we’re now facing the entire building with a new Dryvit exterior. Two other buildings are used for our fabrication plant and additional storage, so we can physically handle more growth.

DIMENSIONS: For someone so intent on being named as a member of the building team, you must set on edge the teeth of some general contractors, don’t you? There are GC’s who don’t want their subs to even know the name of the project.

HOGANCAMP: I want the owner to spec Lassiter as part of the team, yes. The GC won’t protect our interests, especially if it’s low bid. A GC can hate us, but they’ll have to work
with a team member and the only way you can get that kind of preferential treatment is if you have something to contribute, if you can handle the project scope. Truth is, more and more, even the GC wants that single contractor package.

DIMENSIONS: I suppose a sharp
distinction should be made between a
general contractor and a broker?

HOGANCAMP: That’s really what I’ve been referring to is the broker type. A broker generally offers only a telephone service and a job superintendent. When the latter is of questionable value we do what we prefer, handle the job ourselves.

DIMENSIONS: On a load bearing job you would be just as important—if not more so—than the HVAC or electrical contractor?

HOGANCAMP: On a load bearing job, we’ll have 50% of the project. I learned a good lesson on steel and marketing while still a laborer with this company.

In the early 60s, we switched a traditional masonry partition system for a hospital to a trussed steel stud wall with lath on both sides. Lynn Lassiter and Roy Starks got their information together, made a presentation to the hospital board, and changed the job completely.

We finished up giving them an equally good wall for less money and less construction time. Everyone won in that change yet speed was to our advantage—and we controlled the entire job. It was a thing of beauty. You just don’t forget a lesson like that where marketing and construction are dovetailed.

DIMENSIONS: Still, though, you have a limit with load bearing steel? What is it, five stories, tops?

HOGANCAMP: We’re negotiating a job now in excess of six stories. It’s a special case, on the edge of technology—right where we like to be.

DIMENSIONS: And I take it you're also offering the package for the interior?

HOGANCAMP: Of course. We can do the entire system, so why not? When it comes to floors, walls and ceilings, the trend is toward a single contractor who can assume total responsibility. That’s where the real growth is.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s talk about pre-fabbing. What are the benefits for a contractor getting into it today?

HOGANCAMP: As I mentioned before, you get in at the beginning. I think it would be a bit tough for a contractor to enter this market successfully today, given the level of competition already in place. It takes a considerable investment... trucks, warehousing, cranes, jigs, inventory—not to mention the management commitment to marketing, technical skills, design assistance.

With any new market, you must pay your dues. The learning curve is pain-
ful, you learn from your mistakes, and you need volume to get a decent return on your investment.

DIMENSIONS: What do you think, then, poses a reasonable new market for a wall and ceiling contractor?

HOGANCAMP: There’s a vast, untapped area in loadbearing steel framing. It just hasn’t been sold enough and so far both contractors and designers have been reluctant to get in—

DIMENSIONS: Why?

HOGANCAMP: I really can’t answer that. Perhaps it’s because so many contractors and designers lack the design know-how to properly market and evaluate a loadbearing system.

In my own dealings with steel manufacturers I can sense their frustration. They know they have a good product but they can’t get the contractors excited enough to go for this kind of work.

DIMENSIONS: At this point, Ben, a sort of double question if you don’t mind: who will do the marketing for loadbearing steel and what do you feel is its future?

HOGANCAMP: The marketing, of necessity, would be a joint undertaking . . . largely because of the technical expertise required. I feel it’s the contractor’s responsibility to do the bird-dogging, the desktop tasks, but then he should call in a manufacturer to assist with the technical refinements.

In response to your second question, I think it’ll expand into a profitable market. It’s just in the beginning. Remember, too, that many contractors are not fully considering the joist market. The open web bar joists are in use and this enables us to compete successfully with the “C” stud.

All in all, I see steel construction—light gauge and loadbearing—growing swiftly. It has just too many benefits to ignore forever.

DIMENSIONS: And the Lassiter company? What is its future?

HOGANCAMP: I don’t intend to slow down in my working habits and I have the best supervision and work force that can be put together. We have a long, exciting future—and we’re getting stronger every day. I’d say we had a good future along with this entire industry.