Taking a Stand on QUALITY

Danny Bonnell and His Award-Winning Commercial Systems, Inc. Have Proven That Quality EIFS Jobs Start With the Application

By Michael J. Major

When we first got into this marketplace, there had been a major failure of an EIFS product on a high-rise, and this was one of the negatives we had to sell against,” says Danny Bonnell, president, Commercial Systems, Inc., Myrtle Beach, S.C. “There was a desire for EIFS products but also a lot of concern because of some past EIFS performances as well as the quality of the installation and workmanship.” But Bonnell has a philosophy he calls “Finding that every negative has a positive. You take the same energy that rises in a negative situation, but you turn it into a positive.”

Bonnell is a contractor who doesn’t do any drywall or metal-stud work; he limits himself strictly to plastering, focusing on EIFS. His single-minded dedication has paid off. In 1994, of the three awards presented by the EIFS Industry Members Association, Clearwater, Fla., for excellence—residential, commercial and retrofit—he won the first two and won again for residential in 1995. “We had several ‘buildings that Hurricane Hugo went through without causing any damage,’” Bonnell says. “Two houses on the oceanfront that took a direct hit from Hugo had their decks torn off and roofs torn off, but our EIF system remained intact.”

Bonnell, 53, has been in the construction business since 1963, when at age 21 he got
At the Feb. 10 EIMA Awards Breakfast, Danny Bonnell (far right) is congratulated by EIMA President Joe Vuono (far left) for winning the Excellence in EIFS Construction award in the New Commercial category. Danny Bonnell II is pictured in the middle.

out of the army and got in on the ground floor with EIFS in the late 1970s, and in 1983 won Dryvit’s Tip of the Hat award for his North Town Square project in Parkersburg, W. Va. It was in West Virginia, in fact, where Bonnell had started his business. But the construction market was weakening in that area, and the cold winters usually meant several months without work. On the other hand, he had been vacationing in Myrtle Beach for several years and saw the opportunities there, despite the bad reputation EIFS had gained in that area. So, he started knocking on doors.

**EIFS Pioneer**

His first project in Myrtle Beach was a retirement complex that originally specified stucco, but which he converted into a total 100,000-square-foot EIFS system. Each of his positive EIFS accomplishments helps to recede the negative connotations of the past.

And one good thing leads to another. For instance, Bonnell pioneered the use of EIFS in theaters in his area. In fact, his work on the Alabama Theater was what won him EIMA’s 1994 Award for Excellence in the commercial category. “We were able to do special accent window trimmings, quoins and large tapered columns,” Bonnell says. From this 35,000-square-foot project, he went on to a number of other theaters, including the Gatlin Brothers Theater, the Ronnie Milsap Theater, the Dixie Stampede, owned by Dolly Parton, and he’s just completed the Palace Theater, the largest theater in the Myrtle Beach area. This is a freestanding complex with 105,000 square feet of EIFS on it. He’s also completed the 95,000-square-foot Myrtle Beach Convention Center.

One thing that sets Bonnell apart is a lot of high-definition work, with special shades and columns. Much of this work is through his association with the Leesburg, Fla.-based Treadway Industries, a company that manufactures special high-tech cuts, details and EPS shapes.

**Something Extra**

What really sets Bonnell apart is the solidity of his work. “We’ve built our company based on quality workmanship and being able to complete the job on time, as well as being able to give the
owner just a little more than he asked for,” he says.

It’s that something extra that makes the difference, especially in an area visited by hurricanes. For instance, even in his residential projects, he uses a minimum of 2 inches of insulation and both glues and mechanically fastens the substrate. He utilizes heavy-duty mesh and totally installs the base coat and mesh prior to installing the accent bands and window treatment. “This requires you make an additional pass, but it seals the area completely as additional insurance against water infiltration.”

Bonnell does his own scaffolding up to 10 floors. “Most contractors farm that off, but we have our own people on board,” he says. “Safety-wise, we are more comfortable, and we know the insulation is proper.” Bonnell adds that members of his foam and trim crew are actually carpenters by trade: “We feel carpenters are more oriented toward cutting angles, setting details and getting the proper spacing. Their tools for putting foam on are entirely different from what a plasterer uses. Once the carpenters’ work is done, we go to the plasterers for putting on the actual base and finish coats. All of this helps us achieve the quality we strive for.”

Another factor that distances Bonnell from his competition is that, he says, “We have a standing policy: Once we do a building, we continually go back and take care of minor repairs at no charge to the owner. We consider that to be a good business practice. Myrtle Beach is a small town in a tourist area. The small-town folks here are very close-knit, so good news travels fast, as does bad news.”

Bonnell best sums up his approach when he says, “We sit down with folks and explain how the system works, and then we make sure they’re satisfied.” The result, Bonnell reports, is “that we get a tremendous amount of repeat business.”

**Applying Trust in EIFS**

It’s not a Pollyanna world, however, Bonnell acknowledges. “You have to start with trust and then you have to keep proving yourself to build on that trust,” he says. “I never imagined it would be so difficult to keep going on. I keep telling my guys, ‘Hey, we’re still having fun, aren’t we?’ And I look for that positive in every negative. But I can understand how people get burned out. That bend keeps coming up, and you don’t want to go around it. It would be nice if you could reach a plateau and then just coast. But it’s a hard one to reach especially when, as a contractor, you’re tied to one thing and one thing only, such as EIFS.”

Part of the difficulty, Bonnell says, is that “EIFS is a young industry, which has been around for only about 25 years. It’s still got a long ways to go.” Part of the problem of building a good reputation with EIFS, he explains, is that the product too often gets a bad reputation. The problems, he points out, don’t have to do with the product, but rather with how it is sometimes
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—Danny Bonnell, President, Commercial Systems, Myrtle Beach, S.C.

applied. “Some of the weak points I’ve observed are no back-wrapping of the EIFS board; the use of questionable substrates; and terminations, roof flashings and window details that are not properly installed.”

Another problem, Bonnell says is that “currently there are 43 manufacturers of EIFS systems, but with very little-control in place to ensure the product is being properly installed. The availability of EIFS is greater today than it’s ever been, through lumber yards and other outlets that will sell it to anybody.” Bonnell says that many of the EIFS manufacturers who started out with certification programs have withdrawn them because of the liability they then incurred. One solution, Bonnell suggests, is that applicators become state licensed or certified, and the local city or county inspector makes sure the product is code-approved for a particular application.

Meanwhile, what Bonnell builds on is his base of 35 employees. “What keeps you going is the quality and productivity of your employees,” Bonnell says. He trains them well, but, he explains, “It’s important to also keep your people with you. It costs a lot to train someone, and you don’t want to become a training school to train someone only to have him go work for somebody else.”

Bonnell pays comparable wages and benefits, but keeps his people together mainly through instilling values of teamwork and loyalty “This is not a business you can run from behind a desk,” he says. “I’m out there in the field with them every day getting
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—Danny Bonnell, President, Commercial Systems, Myrtle Beach, S.C.
If a company has a good reputation and is respected, the men who work for you will want to share in that pride and be proud to work for you.”

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the radios cost $1,000 to $1,200 each, they basically paid for themselves in about a year.

Commercial Systems’ annual volume is in the $1.5 to $2.0 million range. This past year, revenues came close to $2.5 million, but Bonnell has found that more income does not necessarily mean more profit; it means more unskilled labor and more supervision, all of which impacts the bottom line, so he prefers to stay within his typical range.

Bonnell has been involved with EIFS from the beginning and expects his company to stay with it in the future. He’s looking long term, for his son, Danny II, came to Myrtle Beach to join his dad 10 years ago when he got out of college. “He tried it for a while and liked it,” Bonnell says. “He came up through the ranks, starting out mixing mud and learning the trade pretty much through my eyes.” His son is more field-oriented and works with the men to achieve quality control, while the elder Bonnell concentrates on the marketing and scheduling parts of the business. “Whatever differences we have we can sit down and work out, and we never have strong disagreements,” Bonnell says. “We have a very good working relationship for a father and son. We make a pretty good team.”

About the Author
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