Although Tim Wies says, “I haven’t been able to hit the ground running as quickly as I would have liked,” the facts indicate that he’s gotten his new business off to a pretty good start.

Now in his third year of T.J. Wies Contracting in St. Louis, Mo., Wies, 36, still works out of his basement, but this 2,000-square-foot area houses five office staff, with some 55 to 65 men in the field. And, at a time when most new companies are lucky to barely survive the first year in business, Wies describes his progress to date:

“The first year we set up a budget and the goals we wanted to obtain,” he says. “We surpassed that goal within the first nine months and exceeded it at year’s end by 30 percent. The second year we more than doubled our volume, again exceeding our goal. We’re now on pace to possibly double out goal once again. Our five-year goal was in the $5 million to $6 million range. I feel that after this, our third year, we...
will be about 80 percent close to
achieving that goal, with revenues of
about $4 million."

T. J. Wies Contracting offers services in
the fields of commercial drywall, insu-
lация and acoustic ceilings, but Wies
considers drywall to be his company’s
specialty. The company has computer-
ized accounting and job-costing func-
tions for the job, and a goal to be
accomplished within a year is getting
estimating on line.

Beginner’s luck? Not quite. “I’ve been
in or around this industry all my life,”
Wies says. “As long as I can remember,
I’ve been going to jobsites and to the
conventions put on by the Association
of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—
International.” Tim’s father, Jim, has
been an owner of a couple of wall and
ceiling companies. Tim worked sum-
mers through high school and college
for these firms. Then, after graduating
from the University of Missouri, he
went through the carpenter union
apprentice school and worked in the
field for five years. The last two of these
he spent days as a foreman and
evenings learning estimating and pro-
ject management. He then went into
this full time for about 10 years.

**Service Is Stressed**

About two years ago, Tim knew his
father, 61, was contemplating retire-
ment. “So I decided to strike out on my
own,” Wies says, explaining that the
reasons did not have to do with any
animosity, but with differences in cor-
porate philosophy.

“Our company tries to be service or-
oriented,” Wies explains. “I can’t say we’ve
achieved total success. But we’re trying
to furnish a higher quality product and
offer more timely service so we can
build long-term relationships, not only
individually but on a company-wide
level. Everybody in construction devel-
op some sort of personal relationship,
both good and bad. We try to stress to
all our employees the importance of
developing and maintaining good rela-
tionships. When everyone in an organi-
ization has this attitude, then you’re
really providing service for your cus-
tomer.”

The conflict, Wies acknowledges, is
providing service in a price-driven
industry. His father’s philosophy has
been to go after every job, large or
small. “My father’s company bid on
about anything, with no size limits,”
Wies says. “I had to get used to work-
ing with a limited amount of capital.

My biggest learning experience was
having to stop going after jobs that
were out of our financial capacity This
has been the biggest stumbling block,
that I haven’t been able to hit the
ground running as quickly as I would
like.”

The big difference between Wies’ pre-
sent and former positions, from both a
practical and philosophical perspective,
is service vs. bid. But there are other
differences as well. Part by chance and
part by design, Wies has maintained a
less rigid employer-employee relation-
ship in order to motivate his people to
do their best work.

“It’s been a learning process to get peo-
ple in the field and challenge them with
a new position and new ideas; it’s a dif-
f erent way of doing things,” Wies says.
“There’s been a learning curve as people
are put into unfamiliar positions, but we’ve gotten through that learning curve very well.”

**Laid-Back Style**

Starting the company from scratch with an intent to build quickly, Wies didn’t have the luxury of having all the right people for the right positions. So, drawing heavily on friends and acquaintances, he took the right people and encouraged them to make themselves right for the position. For instance, Rick Faulkner, a former job-site foreman, moved into the position of field supervisor and project manager, and none of the field foremen had any previous foreman experience at the start.

“I run a fairly loose ship,” Wies says. “I’m a believer in running things a little more laid back I’m a hands-off manager, and I believe in delegating the work, expressing my expectations and then letting good people come up with the answers themselves.”

Wies contrasts this approach with the hard-nosed construction approach: “I’m the boss, so you do it.” “My college studies were in administration with a minor in psychology,” he says. “I feel if you put the right people in the right spot, they inherently want to do well. Most will do whatever it takes when they see their decisions directly affect what is happening.”

Wies himself didn’t really have to learn a brand new job role. “Basically, the job I do now is very similar to what I did at the former company,” he says. “Dad had his customers, and I had mine. We both bid or negotiated the jobs, set them up and managed them, taking them all the way through invoicing and collections. We both handled all the procedures from start to finish, with the field supervisors handling the manpower, scheduling and job-site coordination.”

But, though the form of his job remains the same, Wies is trying to
change the content. “One of our biggest problems, and one of the biggest in the industry, is similar to the old question about what comes first, the chicken or the egg,” he says. “The general contractor wants more manpower and wants to push the schedule without fully understanding the ramifications. We try to come through with an honest approach about how much can be done during the day. We try to come up with an agreement instead of basically going and doing our own thing and sacrificing the relationship, or doing it their way and sacrificing our margins.”

In all Wies’ efforts, he’s attempting to put quality over quantity, or, to put it another way, to implement a value-added philosophy that will allow more negotiated work and less bid. Still, Wies’ work is currently 90 percent bid. “The value-added philosophy is not a short-term one in which you can expect immediate results,” Wies says. “But it will pay off in the long run.”

**Building Relationships**

With margins decreasing, competition increasing and more doors having to be beaten on to create better chances, Wies believes the best approach “is being more than a voice on the phone. You have to get out there, shake your customer’s hand and discuss things with him. You have to develop more of a relationship so the work function becomes a win-win situation for both firms. The more time you spend talking and basically selling your company and yourself the more value can be incorporated into the relationship.”
Wies also believes in building relationships with his financial partners. “When we started, I had a good relationship with our bank because of my personal accounts and from dealings with the other company. So it became another one of the components of our success. We also view the bonding and insurance agents as members of our team. If we keep an open relationship with them, they become a major asset. We’ve found that all they want is to see us succeed, so the exchange of quality information is vital to our success. We use them as advisers, as we do our accounting company, which we also use as a sounding board for new ventures or directions.”

“I BELIEVE IN DELEGATING THE WORK, EXPRESSING MY EXPECTATIONS AND THEN LETTING GOOD PEOPLE COME UP WITH THE ANSWERS THEMSELVES.”

—Tim Wies

By surrounding himself with skilled, highly motivated employees and sound financial advisers, Wies explains, “I’ve had a lot of headaches taken away from me, so I can move ahead with the company and concentrate all my energies on doing what I know best.”

Still, all this doesn’t exactly make his job a leisurely one. Getting his business going takes up 12 to 14 hours, five days a week. But here too Wies counts on some help, that of his wife Barbara, who, he says, “is the glue that holds the family together,” taking care of their two sons and handling all the family activities.

In addition to all the initiatives Wies has brought to his new business, he’s also benefited from a good economy. “For the past couple years, St. Louis has been far from sluggish but not yet overheated,” he says. “There’s been close to full employment for all union trades.”

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In starting his new business, has Wies made any mistakes? “The biggest mistake we made has been not maintaining control of a couple of jobs,” he says. “Sometimes the jobsite conditions, general contractor and other trades can cause your productions to slip. You need to recognize this as soon as possible and adjust your game plan for the job. If you are not paying extremely close attention, then the job will get away from you.”

“They always say that the way to measure a contractor is by the jobs he does not do, not by the jobs he does,” Wies continues. “We have had a couple of jobs we should not have done, but we also have learned from them. I stress to everyone that we need to learn something from all of our mistakes. I’ve never been to a school that I didn’t have to pay for, so jobsite mistakes are another school—the School of Hard Knocks. It’s an expensive school, but if you learn from it, it is a little easier to accept.”

About the Author
Michael J. Major of Port Townsend, Wash., is a free-lance writer for the construction industry.

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