

Most companies begin their corporate lives as personal manifestations of the owner; if the founder is low key and laid back, then the company tends to be low key and laid back. Inevitably and quite naturally, this psychic connection between the owner and the company's personality dilutes as the organization grows and the owner's front line interactions lessen. That, however, is not the case with Custom Counters By Precision – a well-sized and well-regarded countertop fabricator/installer located in northern New Jersey. The part family caretaker, part young dreamer and all entrepreneurial hustler who created this outfit is as present as ever in its personae. Solely owned and successfully managed by William (Bill) Prusiensky since 1981, Custom Counters has weathered a near constant jet stream of industry changes and economic thunderbolts. Astonishingly, after 28 windswept years of exposure to the erosive effects of so many surfacing seasons, neither he nor his business are worse for the wear.

Can a Child Train to be a Fabricator?

If one can truly prepare to be a fabricator, Bill Prusiensky's youthful path was amazingly effective. By age 10, Prusiensky's entrepreneurial spirit had him delivering newspapers. Soon he learned that being the manager, the delivery team and the collection agent made expansion and profitable growth impossible and so his business model morphed, and he expanded his routes and subbed them out to friends and siblings.

By age 13, Prusiensky began apprenticing in a cabinet shop just three houses down from his own – working everyday and Saturdays too. Later, he attended a trade school for carpentry and cabinet making and, by the age of 19, he was a sought after freelance cabinet and countertop installer for area kitchen dealers working under the name Precision Installations.

As a young husband to his bride and business partner, Karen, and a young father to a growing family in need of health coverage and a steady paycheck, Prusiensky also took on a 48 hour per week job at a local Grand Union grocery store – in addition to the 40 to 50 hours he was putting in as an installer. Recognizing a need in the marketplace for a customer and quality-oriented fabricator that truly understood the needs of the dealer, the installers and even the homeowner, Prusiensky made the investment and transformed his business into a high-growth shop. Amazingly, he managed to keep his full-time job at the Grand Union for eight more years after incorporating as Custom Counters By Precision. His sales revenue approached \$1 million by the time he felt secure enough to leave Grand Union and handle the insurance premiums each month.

PROOF POSITIVE.

Custom Counters By Precision shows that desire and outlook are powerful business attributes and legitimate management strategies to adopt.

By Chris Traynor, SPHR



These nurses' stations at Memorial Sloan-Kettering healthcare facility utilize a mixture of solid surface and quartz surfacing.



Prusiensky credits much of his success to dedicated employees, such as Greg Milewski shown here routing another precise cutout.

BUSINESS IN BRIEF

Desire and Outlook – A One-Two Punch

Most companies have a couple of big essential “sails” that catch the gusts of revenue blowing by. Prusiensky employs desire and outlook. These untraditional mainsails are generally perceived as two of the more warm and fuzzy business elements, but in Prusiensky’s hands they are legitimate, powerful management strategies. Some might take exception to applauding a business owner’s desire because entrepreneurs are often defined by their appetite for continued achievement, but that’s an apple to his orange.

Separating Custom Counters from other firms is the purity and concentration of desire daily manifested in the form of relentlessly attacking potential opportunities; not to mention the extended shelf life of this desire, which after nearly 30 years, remains passionate, potent and plentiful. Prusiensky has held onto his desire without suffering any evaporation from the persistent heat of business battle. You may ask how other dedicated owners can suffer a rupture in their desire? As Prusiensky explains it, the breach usually happens in the nearly imperceptible manner that accompanies “Prevent Defense.”

Owners Lose Fire when “Prevent Defense” Smothers Desire

Prusiensky has known his share of sharp, successful owners, across dozens of industries, who have worked so hard that they’ve been rewarded with significant revenue growth. As he describes it, the trouble begins when the hard-charging entrepreneurs begin feeling fulfilled and secure. “These guys were always the aggressive hands-on types – fighting in the trenches, building tops, dealing with customers, doing whatever was necessary,” he explained. “And then they grow bigger and the owners finally feel safe to breathe, but at the same time, they’re also dog-tired. So they pull back, spend more time at their desk and start delegating. The owner pulls himself from the front lines and without ever meaning to do it, the whole company ends up playing prevent defense – the exact opposite of what made them a success in the first place.”

If you follow football you’ll know that when any team plays prevent defense they have fundamentally changed strategies from playing to win to protecting against defeat. Fans curse as their team, guarding against huge gainers, gives away the game in soul-crushing 20 yard chunks. As Prusiensky has witnessed, the go-getter spirit that once aggressively drove the business forward becomes overcautious and suddenly their policies and practices center on the word “NO” and the phrase “THAT WON’T BE POSSIBLE.”

Even though the company was on track for a record sales year in 2009, according to Prusiensky, the “Culture of No” that has plagued corporate America has been permanently banished from his small universe in the recent economic downturn. There is no such thing as a cushion or safety margin, or a moment to relax. Prusiensky sheepishly admitted to occasionally keeping an extra person on board to press himself into hustling harder so that everyone remains safely on payroll. He proudly reports that in the 28 years of operations, through three recessions and multiple industry pauses, Custom Counters By Precision has never let anyone go because of an economic downturn.

Smash-Mouth Football Becomes Smash-Mouth Business

Prusiensky played a lot of varsity football in high school. He played both sides of the ball and he loved it. Tight end. Nose guard. Smash-mouth football. About those glory days he recalled, “I wasn’t the biggest guy in the world but when I walked out on that turf before the game and looked at the other team, I’d think this is my field ... this is my ball. What are you going to do about it?” Prusiensky was taught well how to prepare for a contest; it wasn’t all physical – it was about establishing a mindset. Game day was the essence of positive expectation. “In business, everyday is game day,” he said. “If you don’t believe you are going to win, you’ve already lost.”

Black Monday, the 22 percent market value crash of 1987, coincided with Prusiensky’s first full year as a wholesale fabricator. “It was scary, but I learned how to work and run a business in a terrible economy – it made me a warrior – and I never forget the 22 families I’ve got counting on me.” He protects those families with his own brand of smash-mouth business because, at the end of his day, business is nothing but personal.

How does Prusiensky communicate this extraordinary level of desire, enthusiasm and daily market attack to his staff, as well as display his hands-on personae to his customers? Here are some examples of his desire and outlook at work:

1. Last year, a modest corner of his shop was converted to a first-ever private office for Prusiensky. It allowed for confidential strategy sessions, employee conferences and some precious quiet moments. The new office was abandoned just three days later. He could not tolerate being separated from the buzz of customer activity and the constant flow of information.
2. Every single request for quotation (now totaling 50+ per day) is given a final once-

- “Precision Installations” of Passaic, NJ, founded 1981 by William Prusiensky – age 20
- First Year Sales = \$120,000, Current Sales = \$3,000,000+
- Revenue has more than doubled since fiscal 2000
- Average Invoice Value: 2005 = \$1,156, 2009 = \$1,043
- Surfacing products offered – solid surface, engineered stone, laminate, granite (nominal)
- Sales Breakdown by Revenue – engineered stone 50%, solid surface 30%, laminate 20%
- Sales Breakdown by Square Footage: laminate 35%, engineered stone 35%, solid surface 30%
- Historical Sales by Market Sector: Residential 85%, Commercial 15%
- Sales by Customer Type (Top 3): 1. kitchen dealers 2. millwork houses 3. remodelers
- Full-time Employees 22: breakdown - office 5, outside sales 2, shop 10, installation 5
- Employee Experience/Loyalty - average tenure of staff is 8.6 years
- Total Payroll (includes all officers & management) as percent of sales = 29.2%
- Total Operating Expenses (2008) as a percent of total sales = 47.3%
- Accounts Payable: 100% of material suppliers are discounted or within current terms

over by Prusiensky to screen for the possibility of improvement, which might include seeking a better buy price, alternate layouts, trimming material usage, saving shop time or pricing the job more creatively (without discounting every fabrication upgrade or making it a freebie) to enhance the chances of closing the job and “getting it off the street.”

3. Each Friday, outside salespeople report in and contact customers who recently received quotes. Calls are made and orders are asked for – resulting in increased closing ratios and always welcome new revenue. Even after 28 years, this business retains an extraordinary appetite for “the chase.”

4. For many years, Custom Counters By Precision has



William (Bill) Prusiensky, president & founder of Custom Counters By Precision, Passaic, N.J., shares his philosophy for success.

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undertaken an annual effort to personalize the bond between themselves and their customers, as well as show their authentic gratitude for the loyalty their customers demonstrate each year by holding a highly anticipated annual Customer Appreciation Night. The event is held at a luxurious banquet restaurant and it features displays, industry speakers, executives from manufacturers, multi-media presentations, door prizes, live entertainment and a lavish dinner for upwards of 200 customers. While efforts are made to introduce certain key messages as well as fine tune brand awareness, the evening is dominated by just one theme – appreciation, recognition, gratitude and respect for the solid customer relationships that fill those big sails on Prusiensky's ship. It is an expensive tribute to the intangible and completely irreplaceable human elements of business -- and it is worth every penny.

5. Concerned by his customers' negative outlook for the economy and local business activity, Prusiensky commissioned a professional 30-minute PowerPoint presentation, using significant dollars of his own, to counter certain depressing financial forecasts and provide a strong counter-balance to the growing assumption that a

"great undefeatable recession" was upon the nation. Prusiensky firmly believed there was no forecaster to accurately predict his level of success, or that of his dealers, so his goal was to demonstrate how to outsmart the contraction while buoying the spirits of those on the front lines. Is it purely coincidental that Custom Counters revenue is on a record pace during this economic downturn?

Outlook as a Weapon

Desire, in its pure, ego-less form, fuels a unique kind of professionally aggressive practices (which, in Prusiensky's case, center on his expert, high-impact involvement in the review of all quotations and material orders just prior to their release). Driving issues such as the closing rate on open quotations, as well as the belief that every market niche – along with every upcoming year – is theirs for the taking, are the attitude and outlook of Custom Counters, associates. Prusiensky, along with his entire staff, live and breathe in a world where "Yes" rules the day and inspires their policies and initiatives.

Bill Prusiensky (regardless of his leading performance) would hate being portrayed as some saintly know-it-all or photo-shopped "surfacing superhero." He'd be the first to dismiss any overblown praise in order to

remind everyone that he's simply a hard-working, imperfect business owner with a productive, and sometimes even chaotic, countertop shop in scenic Passaic, New Jersey. He'd own up to his company's weaknesses, concerns and mistakes long before you would hear something remotely boastful come from him. And that definitely adds to his success.

Concerning current conditions, Prusiensky noted, "We're busy – the shop's working

six days a week – but I've never seen it like this out there – it's a war." Sobering words, indeed. The company prides itself on locating and concentrating on new market niches that no one else seems to be going after. Custom Counters has seen terrific new sales activity with plumbing wholesalers and architectural millwork houses since bringing its focus to bear upon them. Prusiensky's warning came with a smile, "You can't be meek – you have to dig into their world, learn what they do and then teach them everything that you do. You can't be bashful – you have to ask for the order. I guess you could say we're not bashful."

As for advice on how to uncover new growth, his message was twofold, "When you're slow, turn first to your existing regular customers – there's always more work in them! [Then] go hard after a new niche – learn all you can about their needs and then be their new best answer."

Sharing that goes Above and Beyond Custom Counters By Precision has enjoyed notoriety and growing sales volume in the last quarter century (see Business in Brief Sidebar). "All of it would vanish," said Prusiensky, "without the caring and incredibly loyal staff that stand with me and fight the good fight everyday." And when it comes to the financial view of his team, he was quite clear, "I'd rather pay the right money, give them the right equipment and training – so they stay – and they do stay. This is my competitive advantage!"

In this age of the occasional corporate charlatan and business diva, Prusiensky's genuine modesty, traditional values and easy likeability – coupled with his natural instinct to fly under the radar – is both welcome and sorely needed. The plain fact remains that Prusiensky, and other impactful people like him, are good for this industry and all those around them. **ISFA**

About The Author: In addition to addressing a wide range of issues affecting the surfacing industry today with his progressive writings and presentations, Chris Traynor, SPHR, is the Director and Knowledge Scout for Whip-Smart™ Management Consulting LLC., Wayne, N.J. (www.whip-smart.com) as well as a board-certified Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR). Chris has a total of 30 years of experience in the surfacing industry as part-owner and VP-Operations of Dolan & Traynor Inc., one of the original and largest marketing distributors of DuPont Corian, as well as a leading industry consultant (marketing and management) to fabricators, distributors, manufacturers and associated firms. He can be reached at 973-831-4274 or ctraynor@whip-smart.com.

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