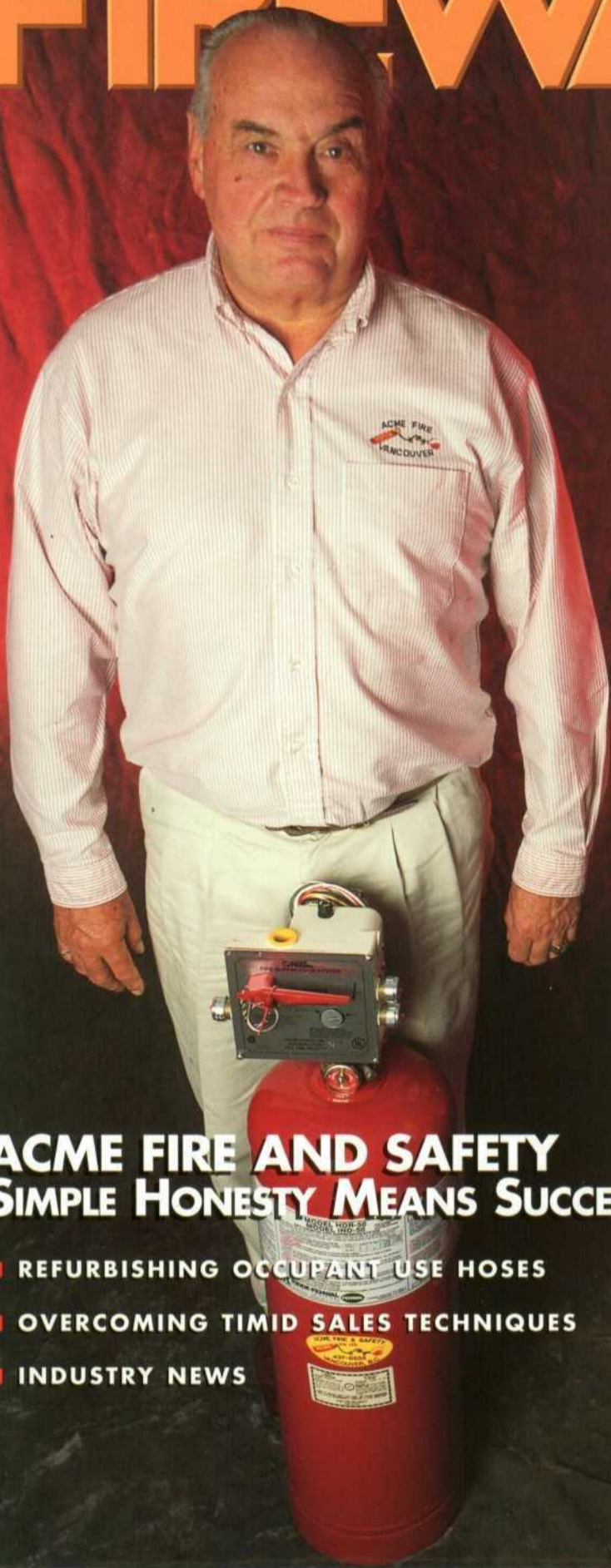


FIREWATCH!



ACME FIRE AND SAFETY SIMPLE HONESTY MEANS SUCCESS

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THEM STRAIGHT



Acme Fire and Safety Celebrates Simple Honesty and Proves That in Business, Sometimes the Good Guys Do Win

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDALL COSCO

Since 1972, Acme Fire and Safety Co., Ltd., has provided its customers with fire equipment and service ranging from portable extinguishers and emergency lighting to large systems for restaurants, gas stations and vehicles. In the early years, Bruce Buckner kept the home fires burning, while Lino Tonolli did installations in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan as well as British Columbia. Under the leadership of the partners the company has developed a wide customer base that stretches from the pacific side of Vancouver, British Columbia, to the Alberta border, an area equal in distance to that between Vancouver and San Francisco. They've done it with their 20 employees and a wide range of products and service, but without a single salesperson.



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"We have no salespeople," says Buckner. "There's no one who's designated to go out and sell. Everyone does their own thing here." Unconventional though it may be, there's no question that their system works.

Loyalty stretches beyond customers here. Of the company's 20 employees, nearly half have been with Acme for more than 10 years—two of those people have worked for Buckner and Tonolli for more than 25 years. Ask Buckner why employees stay so long and he laughs. "I don't know. They love us, I guess." And then he explains the company's unparalleled benefits package.

But the real reason, one suspects, lies beneath benefits, salaries, and tangible things. It's something that comes through the minute Buckner starts talking.

Honesty.

BUILDING UP

Bruce Buckner is one of those guys—everyone knows one—who feels like a long-lost buddy from the very minute you meet. With a friendly voice and easygoing laugh, conversation flows without effort even if he's never seen you before or heard your voice.

There's something else at work here and it lies in everything he says. Ask a question and you'll get a simple, straightforward response. There's no pretension in his explanations and you get the feeling that there really are no secrets. It comes through in something of a company philosophy. "We really believe in honesty," Buckner says. "We stress it and practice it every day, and tell our employees that if something's true, say it. If it's not, don't."

A mechanical engineer by education, Buckner was working for Boeing in the late 1960s when the company implemented major cutbacks. "I knew I was short-lived there because I was low man on the totem pole," he says, and he left the company to enter into a semi-retirement and, in his words, "vagabond around. I got a contract to do some work in Israel, but I refused to go there." Instead, he went skiing. That's where things got interesting.

"I ran into this guy I knew on the ski patrol," he remembers. "He told me how he'd gotten into portable fire extinguishers just to have something to fool around with part-time." He followed his friend's lead. "I got into portable extinguishers just to have something to do."

His business associate, Lino Tonolli, had emigrated to Canada from Italy in 1956 and had to start from scratch by learning English. From using portable extinguishers to fill time off the slopes, the two men became partners in the industry and purchased Acme in 1974. Today, they rely on and trust each other completely.

"I can honestly say that I've had more fights with my wife than I ever had with Lino," Buckner says. "It's like a marriage. I trust him with anything I have, and vice versa for him. I can go away and say, 'Here, take care of my checks and my money,' and he will, right down to the penny."

That trust is the foundation for what Buckner admits is a unique partnership. "We've always been 50/50, all the way down the line," he says. "We've always shared an office and looked at each other. He does what he does best and I do what I do best, and anything else we discuss together." Today, Lino's son, Michael, is president of Acme.

THE BUSINESS

Acme's business is broken down into two sectors, each with its own manager and team. The first is alarms and emergency lighting; this is also where sprinklers and portable extinguishers come in. The other sector is systems, and it encompasses installations, service, and internal office administration. The company manages its accounting in-house and prides itself on being fully computerized. This makes Buckner laugh—"I can't do a thing until I turn the computer on!"

In 1974, Acme purchased its office building and the land it stands on. Today, those are managed by Buckton Holdings, another partnership between Buckner and Tonolli. With strong real estate roots in the city, the partners committed themselves to becoming members of the community through volunteer work and donations. Today, a long list of organizations supported by Acme includes the Ronald McDonald House, Canuck Place, Salvation Army, Cystic Fibrosis, and the Rotary Club of Vancouver East.

Although their business is centered solely in Canada, Buckner says he keeps a close eye on industry news from the United States, and for good reason. "What happens in the States basically happens here," he says. American regulations such as UL 300 are frequently echoed by Canadian regulations, and that country's actions are frequently implemented with greater strength and speed than in the U.S. "Truth be known, we're probably further ahead implementing UL 300 than anyplace in the States," he says.

"We use NFPA pamphlets here," he continues. "Our fire laws are written in pretty much the same way, and the Canadian Fire Chiefs Association sells NFPA pamphlets." In addition, the equipment Acme purchases by and large comes from the U.S., so it's important that both countries understand the other's rules and regulations.

"There are no fire systems made in Canada," Buckner explains. "They're all made in the U.S. but must be ULC approved and bilingual. U.S. manufacturers do that for us."

While the similarities between the two countries was the initial impetus that led him to join NAFED, it's not the only thing that keeps him involved.

NAFED MEMBERSHIP

Acme joined NAFED in 1972 and shortly thereafter, Buckner attended his first meeting, held in Las Vegas the year the MGM Grand opened. "The directors meeting consisted of six people with sodas and coffee around a table in a motel," he laughs today.

His NAFED membership keeps him current on U.S. regulations and laws, most of which are echoed in Canada. "NAFED helps me know what's happening and gives me an inside look as to what Acme's future may be," he says. "When things are happening down in the States, we know they're going to happen up here. I can get involved with the fire marshals here and pass information on to them." In fact, at a recent meeting held on UL 300/ULC ORD 1254, more than 165 people packed the room, asking question after question. Thanks largely to NAFED, Buckner had the answers.

Outside of education, there's another, more compelling reason Buckner stays active in the organization and he sums it up in one word. "Networking." He explains, "I can pick up the phone anytime and call so many NAFED members and ask questions, and get good, straightforward, honest answers from them. I can call about wages, products, ask how do you do that or how do you bid that or what would you do, and I always get the answers. It's very, very valuable."

His NAFED membership will continue just as long as he's in the industry. That tenure? Don't even ask.

PEOPLE MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

For the head of a mid-sized company with a huge customer base, Buckner has a schedule to be envied by executives worldwide. In the office by 5:45 a.m. or so, he puts in a full day and is on his way home by 3:30 in the afternoon. Wednesdays are reserved for golf, and for three months of the year, he heads south for an extended vacation. Tonolli maintains a similar schedule. How does he do it? Simple.

"I trust every single one of the people working for Acme," he says. "They all have keys." While on vacation he carries a fax machine and, this year, an e-mail enabled computer, he makes a

point not to call in to the office regularly and check up. There's no need to interrupt his activities.

"If they have questions, they fax them," he says of those holding down the fort at home. "It's not like I have to sit down and work on the phone every day."

Instead, he leaves Acme in the capable hands of Lino and Michael Tonolli; the younger recently assumed the position of president, much to the delight of the two founding partners. "Michael is president of the company and he'll carry on the torch later. The company's livelihood is his livelihood, and he's doing very very well," Buckner says. "If he's got questions, he asks me and he asks Lino. But when decisions need to be made, we don't all need to be there. I don't have to be there for Lino or Michael to decide something, and vice versa."

The trust level apparent in the company is one big reason employees dedicate their careers to Acme almost as a rule. "We pride ourselves on our people," Buckner says, and it's obvious that he means it. But why do they stay so long?

He laughs. "I don't know! They make reasonable wages here and we have outstanding benefits. Where else can you say your medical's taken care of for both you and your family?" Acme provides medical, dental, optical, and life insurance for every

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employee, their spouses, and their children. It's a point of pride here: "We have probably the best benefit program going," he says. The dedication shows in the numbers—of Acme's 20 employees, only five have less than three years tenure with the company.

Not only do the employees get the best benefits Buckner and Tonolli can find, they return the favor whenever possible by spreading the word throughout the metro area. Without a single dedicated salesperson or marketing professional, Acme relies on every employee to act as an ambassador for the company. So far, the bet has paid off in spades as long-time workers talk about the company and distribute information without being asked or having it written into their job descriptions. "Everyone here has a business card and they all give them out," Buckner says. "It's all word of mouth from our customers and our employees, and our open-door policy extends to everyone. If you like us, tell us. If you don't, tell us. If we've got a problem, let us know so we can fix it." That also goes for employees who notice that their peers are doing an excellent job or aren't pulling their weight. As Buckner explains, "If you don't cut it here, the other people are going to tell you so."

Titles don't mean a whole lot around Acme since everyone shares duties to get the job done, and Buckner has to think about what his title is. You see, it depends on the year. "Titles are never something that's sticky with us," he explains. "I have a set of business cards that read 'President,' and Lino has the same set with his name on them. Every five or 10 years, we'd change the legal books and trade off."

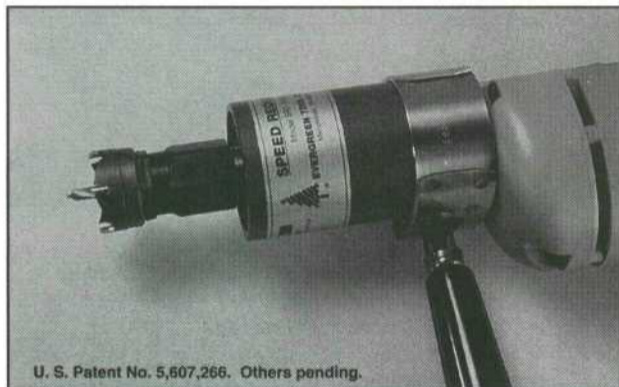
Buckner and his wife of 30 years, Nadine, are parents to five children and grandparents to 13, with a 14th on the way. Tonolli works with son, Michael, and enjoys his two grandchildren. Family is a very big part of life. At the same time, both men are totally dedicated to their work.

So how long will he keep this all up? That's up for debate.

Of all the sales and service and bookkeeping and networking, Buckner can pinpoint his favorite job duty in a heartbeat. It's simple: "Going to work in the morning. I love it. Every single day," he says. "What's that word? Retirement? If you're there one day a week, are you still part of the company? I don't think there will be a day when Lino and I just walk away and stop being involved."

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