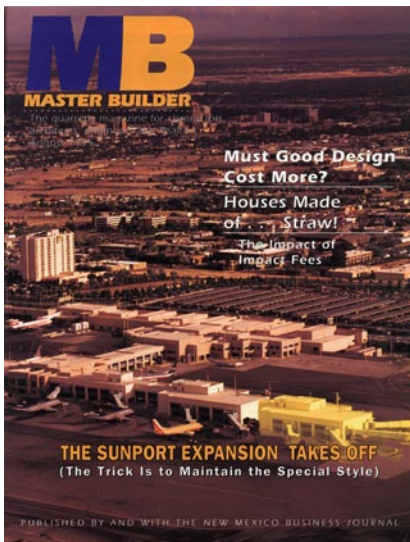


## Martin of Aztec Stresses Ties and Cooperation



For Nansi Martin, President of Aztec Mechanical in Albuquerque, business is more than the bottom line. While the bottom line is important and cannot be ignored—equally, if not more important to her is developing long-term relationships and figuring out how to do business her own way.

Martin began her career with Aztec, a heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning subcontractor, in 1977, typing and doing the books in the morning, then picking up and delivering supplies to job sites in the afternoon. “Bob Usher [Aztec’s founder] was very good about teaching me the business. I became an estimator and then a project manager,” said Martin. But, she already had the business in her blood—her father was a general contractor and she helped with family building projects from a very young age. “Our entire family built our home—we worked side by side.”

And working side by side, as a team, a long-term team, is central to how she runs her business. She values relationship, she wants to work in win-win situations, and she believes deeply in a cooperative spirit. This attitude affects every aspect of her business.

“We advocate win-win,” she said. “Cooperation. Partnering A lot of sub contractors I know spend a great deal of time and energy working against the general contractor and anyone perceived as an enemy and end up in adversarial relationships. It would be better to spend energy toward cooperation; it would lead to more success.”

But, as Martin pointed out, the current, and traditional, system of winning bids is set up so the low bid wins. “Often this means there’s holes in the bid,” Martin said. And when costs rise or things are not done well, people get defensive, and they fight. It becomes a lose-lose situation.

In addition to wanting to move beyond “low bid wins”, Martin believes qualifications should play a bigger role. “We would be better off if we changed the approach we have in the plan and spec market, away from just low bids. Sub-contractors should be qualified. Low bids usually win, and they don’t care if I’ve never done this kind of work. A contractor’s qualification statement should be with each bid and reviewed by the owner and the architect.”

Martin loves being a sub-contractor and the camaraderie established over the years with other subs. “A lot of times those relationships actually make jobs run smoother—by knowing people and their needs and the needs of their businesses.”

Again an emphasis on relationship and finding your own way to work successfully. “We can work with different clients, and we work with all size companies [but] We like to work with those we know. We market to people we think are fair. We’ve changed our focus over time. We’ve become choosier. Aztec hires people who share the firm’s philosophy—delivery of high quality work, and an attitude of cooperation. They actively look for young people and train them; TVI is one of the best sources right now, as young people are looking for summer jobs, and employees’ children. They have technical training sessions and there is informal on-the-job training all the time.



“One of the greatest challenges in this business,” Martin said, “is a lack of trained skilled workers. It’s hard to find people with the right attitude and the right work ethic, even without training. We still need people who understand the trade.”

When computers came into this business, there was a sense that machines were going to replace people. “In all the trades, with the advance of technology, manpower simply was not important any more.” For example, ten years ago one of the most important men was the shop layout person. He would take drawings and produce the sheet metal duct work. Now, this work is all done by computers. For a time, it seemed people and talent got lost in the shuffle. But, as Martin says, “You still need a knowledgeable, talented person who understands dimensions, who is talented visually.”

Martin has made her way in a business often perceived as predominantly male without a lot of gender issues. “The majority of men have been respectful, courteous and appreciative of my knowledge of the business,” she said. While she was reluctant to attach significance to her gender, either in terms of success or difficulties, and does not seek out special treatment (as in bidding on jobs set aside for women-owned businesses), she did admit that the attitudes of cooperation, relationship, and sharing often do start with women—and now that there are more women in positions of power, she expects to see greater movement toward cooperation.

None of this emphasis on relationship and cooperation means Martin ignores the bottom line or traditional planning. When she and her husband, Danny, bought the business in 1986, they had a ten year plan. And now, nine years later, they are close to meeting their sales goals and have already purchased a new building with room for expansion. They learned by trial and error who to work with and what they’re good at. And while they had chances to grow really fast, they didn’t. They took it slow, as they had planned. One of the first things they did was to add a service department. Now, they are a full service commercial HVAC sub-contractor providing design, installation, and service of heating, ventilating, refrigeration, and air conditioning systems. As Martin said, “We took the guess work out of HVAC systems.”

One of the biggest challenges for any business is to plan for ups and downs. “Right now, in Albuquerque, and New Mexico,” she said, “there’s a strong construction market. It’s booming for everybody. But, it won’t go on forever. It never does. Which means we need to plan—for when things slow down. It’s a big burden, we feel responsible for the families and how you manage that... overhead, employees... is critical, particularly for a small company.”



Another hurdle is cash flow. "Cash flow is always a problem, particularly in construction." The accepted practice for payment is to wait 60 days, and often can be 120 days. So, close attention to this issue is critical for small companies.

In spite of, or because of these challenges, Aztec has become a mid-size sub-contractor with 40 employees. It does business throughout New Mexico, as well as Arizona, Colorado, and Texas.

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