

# Window & Door®

[www.WindowandDoor.net](http://www.WindowandDoor.net)

*The Information Source for the Fenestration Industry*

Volume 14, Number 9 | October 2006



## DEALERS of the YEAR



*Window & Door Honors*

# Excellence in the Middle

Leaders in Sales, Marketing, Installation and More ❖❖❖

## AND THE WINNERS ARE:

Leadership in the Professional Market  
**Portland Millwork**

Overall Excellence

Leadership in the Homeowner Market  
**Custom Exteriors**

Plumb, Level & Square  
**Excellence in Installation**  
**Regency Windows Corp.**

Going the Extra Mile  
**Excellence in Customer Service**  
**E.F. San Juan Inc.**

Giving Back  
**Excellence in Community Service**  
**Tom Adams Windows & Carpet**

A Showroom That Sells  
**Excellence in a Retail Program**  
**Weatherite Quality Home  
Improvements**

Getting the Word Out  
**Excellence in Marketing**  
**Exclusive Windows  
& Doors of Austin**

Profiles written by **Christina Lewellen**

## Portland Millwork Does One Thing—and Does It Well

Like many start-ups in the industry, the story of Portland Millwork originates at another company with a group of co-workers who decided to branch out and create their own business. But rather than leaving to compete against their former employer, the five partners of Portland Millwork teamed up to serve the unmet needs of customers who had outgrown the other company. “We formed our own business because our customers were getting into higher and higher quality and more custom homes,” partner Jim Kehoe explains. “The customers we had been taking care of for a long time were growing up and there was an opportunity to serve them because nobody else was.”

Actually based in Tualatin, OR, a suburb of Portland, the company was founded nearly 10 years ago by partners Dave Carlson, Greg McCann, Rick Charlton, and Jeff and Jim Kehoe,

to target high-end builders and contractors in the region. The company—which, in addition to selling primarily wood windows, also has a door and millwork shop—functions more like a luxury car dealership than a lumberyard. The owners know their customers deal with the company not just for quality products, but also for the entire experience. “Builders recognize that many manufacturers’ products are very good,” Kehoe says. “But they want to buy from somebody good. It enhances the product they’re going to buy.”

Serving a particular niche in the market means the company has focus—it does not try to be everyone’s window provider. All five partners and their employees—who are as committed as though they themselves were partners—show up to work each day to provide a specific product to a specific customer. “Portland Millwork succeeds because its sole focus



Jim Kehoe (right) and his four partners, as well as Phil Barney (left) and the rest of Portland Millwork’s employees, remain committed to serving their high-end clients.

is on the high-end custom market,” says Mark Schield, vice president of Weather Shield Windows & Doors. “They are unique in that way. There are only a select few dealers who will focus their business that closely. Too many dealers try to meet all the needs of every market.”

The builders and contractors in the greater Portland region who do use Portland Millwork appreciate the attention to detail that comes from working with a company focused only on high-end clientele. “Everything, from the people to the showroom, is customer oriented,” says Brian Schmidt, general manager of Olsen Homes, Lake Oswego, OR. “Regardless of who takes the lead on a project, everyone seems to know the status of an order, the intricacies of a project, or the next necessary step.”

Commitment to the customer has kept Schmidt and Olsen Homes’ business coming back to Portland Millwork. “Our loyalty to Portland Millwork surpasses pricing opportunities,” he explains. “We just like working with them. We can’t imagine sending our clients to anyone else, or ordering from anyone else. It just wouldn’t feel right.”

And perhaps the strongest statement of all—“Our homes are better as a result of Portland Millwork’s involvement,” Schmidt says.

Richard Edwards, principal of Silver Oak Custom Homes, agrees. “We consider them a very important part of our for-

mula for success in the sales of our new homes,” he says. “Their management convinced us that they could do a better job than anyone else, and then went out and proved it to us.”

### WANTED: FUSSY CUSTOMERS

Discriminating buyers are what Portland Millwork seeks, and takes pride in serving. “The more complicated and fussy people are, the more they actually need who we are,” Kehoe says. “We prefer things to be complicated. They deserve [the attention] because that’s what they’re paying for. I think we know how to provide it for them.”

The partners recognize that Portland is a wood-based culture. Many of the prominent families in the area have connections to the timber and woodworking industry. “It’s a celebration-of-wood kind of environment,” Kehoe says. “It’s a culture that is conscious of wood, conscious of quality workmanship. It demands high quality.”

The company encourages its builders and contractors to bring their clients to the Portland Millwork showrooms—one of which is dedicated to windows and the other to millwork products—to get a feel for what the homeowner would like the completed project to look like. “Our job is to tell them how they can do what they want to be able to do to achieve their dream,” Kehoe explains.

The dealer focuses its efforts on the front-end, vision part



Portland Millwork’s customers know they can get specific questions answered quickly and correctly—regardless of who happens to answer the phone.

## ► “We’re dealing with wood and people. Both of those things don’t necessarily behave the way they should all the time.”

of the process, and the minutia that comes with ordering, checking the order against blueprints and getting the products to the site. Portland Millwork does not, however, install its windows, Kehoe explains. “Particularly in the high-end, that’s something the builder needs to be in complete control of rather than looking to somebody else. And we don’t want to compete with our builders.”

The drive to achieve a particular design vision with its clients has resulted in Portland Millwork having close ties with the local architectural community. The company spends a lot of time calling on the architects in the area, giving presentations, arranging plant visits and hosting educational sessions. “They’re creative people and it’s energizing just being around them,” Kehoe says. “Intimacy with the architectural side is crucial because they’re the ones who design the high-end homes.”

Tina Barclay, principal of the Barclay Interior Design Group, Lake Oswego, OR, says she has been working with Portland Millwork—and only Portland Millwork—since 1998. “They make the specification process smooth and easy and keep us apprised of new products in their industry,” she says. “We don’t have to worry about a thing once I have selected the product.”

The relationship is based on two-way communication, Kehoe points out. Interaction is not just about pushing products in front of designers—Portland Millwork listens to requests and comments from the field to keep up with trends and design needs. “If we can understand what they want their palette to look like, we can communicate that back to the manufacturer.”

Portland Millwork suppliers, in fact, have come to rely on the market feedback that comes from the dealer’s interaction with the local market. “They spend a lot of time with design groups and interior designers, getting a sense of design trends for upper-end homes,” explains Weather Shield’s Schield. “This helps them relate to the needs of the consumer and counsel them on how windows and doors can complement their living areas. They always know what

the new fashion and design trends are and they’re particularly good at sharing that insight with us.”

### KNOWING ITS MISSION

To create a service- and experience-based culture, Portland Millwork employs an internal buzz phrase—“Strive for a successful outcome.” “We’re dealing with wood and people. Both of those things don’t necessarily behave the way they should all the time,” jokes Kehoe. “But what matters is, ‘Was the outcome successful?’ We’ll have a wrong order or cracks in the wood, grain problems—all of that is going to happen from time to time. But we focus on having a successful outcome for the project and that really works well for us.”

Multi-million dollar homes come with hefty window orders that must be executed efficiently and precisely, Kehoe says. The dealer recently dedicated 150 man-hours to checking and rechecking a window order worth \$170,000. When the windows showed up for the project, every one was a perfect fit on the first try. “We spend more hours checking and playing with the order after we get it than we spend on getting the order in the first place,” he says.

The commitment to quality and respect for the project has to be a two-way street, from Portland Millwork’s perspective. The dealer realizes its value-added approach won’t fit with every customer and every project’s budget. “You have to need what we have,” Kehoe says. “We’re not the low-cost provider. You need our technical expertise, quality, service. And you have to be a good customer and pay your bills.”

Doing one thing and doing it well for 10 years has resulted in some powerful business relationships along the way. Suppliers and customers alike have learned through first-hand experience that Portland Millwork will stand behind its mission to strive for a successful outcome.

“When working with a high-end, made-to-order product, you need dealers who are trained to identify individual customer needs, bring a high level of window and door expertise to their customers, and superior support services,” notes Mike Still, director of distributor sales for Marvin Windows & Doors. “Portland Millwork excels at these business objectives and we’re fortunate to be partnered with a wonderful dealer with a strong track record.”



► “If we can understand what they want their palette to look like, we can communicate that back to the manufacturer.”

### EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP

On the personal side, all five owners of Portland Millwork are on their first marriage, with the junior anniversary being more than 20 years. “We are people who believe if you make a commitment, you just keep working it out,” Kehoe explains. “You don’t just abandon ship to do something else.”

The dedication that has resulted in successful marriages has seeped into the business culture at Portland Millwork, as most of the 20-plus employees have been around since the company started. “We don’t have any turnover in our company to speak of,” Kehoe says. “I don’t remember the last time somebody left.”

The partners would like to think the reason for the high level of employee retention is the open-book culture they have established to foster individual ownership in the mission. All employees can talk about any aspect of the company—from profitability to customer service approaches to new equipment purchases. “It’s a team culture in the truest sense of the word,” Kehoe says. “Everybody knows what’s going on.”

The culture over the years has resulted in a customer service-centric reputation among builders and designers, for which the employees rightfully take credit. “If you have people working for you who feel like it’s their business, that translates into taking care of the clients’ needs,” he says.

The intended approach is working, according to employees. “I haven’t worked in a place ever that’s been so free of departments or divisions, and so supportive of us as individuals,” notes David Schulman, a salesman who has been with the company for more than two years.

“Everyone shares in the solutions on everything,” adds Rob Gladheim, a nine-year employee who serves as the window product manager. “Everyone’s part of the answer and we get to see the outcome together.”

Knowing exactly where the company stands financially inspires the team, Schulman says, as everyone looks forward to the monthly bookkeeping report. “The entire ledger is laid out on an overhead projector and we talk

about it,” he says. “We know our profitability and we know when things aren’t going exactly right. It’s how we’re able, as a business team, to be extremely dedicated, efficient and focused.”

Perhaps a small detail, but customer Candace White of Richard White Home Designs, notes that the team approach at the dealer is apparent. “When calling Portland Millwork, no matter who answers the phone, their response is obviously policy when the person is unavailable that you’re calling for—‘I’m sorry so-and-so is unavailable at this moment but is there something I can help you with?’ Wow. When was the last time someone offered help to another person on the phone?” she says. “That’s what we call service. We

love their special touch, and plan to continue working closely with and highly recommending them to everyone we know.”

And what about having five bosses? Staffers explain that other than Dave Carlson who leads the team as the general manager, the five owners rarely use titles and never pull rank. “Two of the owners are salesmen,” Gladheim points out. “They’re bosses, yes, but they all have jobs to do too.”

Schulman says the partners have figured out how to make the five-way ownership work to the company’s benefit. “In theory it shouldn’t work because they’re very different people,” he explains. “But they figured out early on that if you are five different people, you bring five different strengths to the table. They’re supportive of each other and they have been able to build against each others’ strengths.”

Having a single vision also helps with the collaboration, notes Schield. “We don’t see this kind of partnership much, but like any other partnership, it works well because the partners have a common accord as to how they want to conduct business,” he says. “They agree on the business strategy and the market they want to go after. They have a common thought process on how to service the marketplace.”

Having five leaders on the same mission strengthens the company’s ability to reach its goals, agrees Marvin’s Still. “Portland Millwork has used their unique five-partner ownership to their advantage by offering greater attention to their customers and a higher level of professionalism.” □

