

NICHE FOCUSED, PEOPLE DRIVEN

Wal-Mark Contracting specializes in health care and condominium projects, but its reputation for quality drywall construction is pinned to its people.

By Mark L. Johnson

Kevin Barnhart, President of Wal-Mark Contracting Group, LLC, Tampa, Florida, believes his firm is on a roll – building walls for hospitals, fulfilling condominium contracts, growing revenue from three offices. What’s the secret? He says great project management.

“We apply an attention to detail in our estimates – right from the beginning and right down to each panel of SHEETROCK,” said Barnhart. “While we may be a bit more expensive than the next firm, we focus on quality. The customer gets a better product.”

No wonder customers keep coming back. Currently, 90 percent of the company’s wall contracts represent repeat business, and Barnhart wants to keep it that way.

“We primarily look at the repeat customer,” he said. “We go above and beyond what it is expected in order to take care of them. We will continue to develop these relationships.”

Young and Entrepreneurial

Wal-Mark Contracting is a fascinating operation. It is run by a relatively young group of aggressive divisional managers in three Florida offices – Tampa, Orlando and Sarasota.

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Barnhart handles the Tampa concern. Cale Chamberlin is President of the Sarasota branch, and Vice President Coby Welch oversees the firm’s Orlando office.

Each manager operates within a corporate environment, but is free to run his office in complete entrepreneurial fashion. Their performance is based both on generating growth and maintaining the company’s reputation for quality wall construction.

WAL-MARK CONTRACTING GROUP / PAGE 2

“We have a group of individuals that really care about what they do,” said Welch.

“Many contractors seem to care less about the customer. Not us.”

“We make the effort to get out and spend time with customers,” said Ben Engle, a Wal-Mark project manager. “We want to get to know them, and not just show up on their projects.”

Interestingly, Wal-Mark is part of a family of companies operating mostly in the drywall business and each wholly owned by National Construction Enterprises Inc. (NCE), Ypsilanti, Michigan. This year, *Engineering News-Record* (ENR) ranked NCE 49th on its “Top 600 Specialty Contractors” list. NCE’s total revenue in 2004 was \$170.7 million, according to ENR.

By comparison, Barnhart said Wal-Mark Contracting Group’s sales for 2005 exceeded \$80 million. Much of that business came from health-care facility construction – the firm’s tried-and-true niche. Hospitals and medical clinics require building fire-rated walls with numerous above ceiling penetrations, O.R. head walls and plenty of radius soffits and ceilings, and Wal-Mark handles this regularly.

“There are a lot of details involved in health care construction,” said Barnhart. “If you don’t know what you’re doing – how to properly turn your corners, five-side your boxes and seal your penetrations – it will cost you.”

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Not the Biggest, Just the Best

The firm’s approximately \$9-million wall contract at Orlando’s Winnie Palmer Hospital for Women and Babies – an expansion of the Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children – included constructing radius light coves above nurses’ stations and radius walls in pie-shaped patient

WAL-MARK CONTRACTING GROUP / PAGE 3

rooms. The open-atrium entrance has multiple S-shaped soffits and three-story walls both full of reveals, all with a Level 5 finish.

Products from U.S. Gypsum helped get the job done. According to Welch, Wal-Mark uses “pallets and pallets” of SHEETROCK Brand All-Purpose Joint Compound and prefers SHEETROCK Brand Gypsum Panels to any other board. SHEETROCK Brand Acoustical Sealant is also important, since it sound-seals partitions at gaps and electrical box cutouts and wherever dissimilar materials abut both sides of a partition.

At the Mease Countryside Hospital, Safety Harbor, Florida, Wal-Mark handled work in two phases – one a \$6 million contract and the other a \$2 million contract. Here, again, the firm built a variety of specialty walls. Because of the sheer number of wall penetrations, crews coordinated with the plumbing, electrical and mechanical trades to get the job done. Wal-Mark knows all the “tricks of the trade” and, as a result, has earned a quality reputation.

“Our consistent presence in the market place has allowed our on site personnel to really get to know the inspectors and what they expect out of us” said Barnhart. “The inspectors have a comfort level with us because of our past track record .”

Besides contracts for health-care projects, Wal-Mark also works on condominiums – a booming market in Florida. Recently, the company landed the drywall contract for Solaire at the Plaza, a 303-unit high-rise in downtown Orlando. In Tampa, the firm currently has the Grand Central at Kennedy, a 392-unit, twin-tower condominium complex. And, crews just beginning work at Tampa’s 32-floor SkyPoint condominiums.

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Though busy, Wal-Mark keeps growth under control. “We’re not trying to be the biggest drywall contractor in the world – just the best,” said Barnhart.

Company Culture is Key

Barnhart, the man behind Wal-Mark's helm for the past four years, is a graduate of the M.E. Rinker, Sr. School of Building Construction at the University of Florida. One day at school, he heard a speech by the owner of a Naples, Florida, wall subcontracting firm.

"I heard a message about not being afraid to work for a subcontractor," said Barnhart, who had been thinking about working for a general contracting firm. "He planted a seed."

It was a seed that grew. Barnhart took a job with Wal-Mark in 1993, when the firm had one office in Tampa. Nine years later, he was company president. The match has been good.

"We strive for perfection in everything we do – from the estimate to how we manage our jobs," said Barnhart. "I like figuring out how we as a team can do better."

This team has seen little change in its line-up. "We have had very little turnover," said Barnhart. "Myself, Cale, Coby and many of our project managers – we all came right out of school and worked our way up. Now we have a group of other guys in line for the next set of opportunities with the company. We have focused on having the right culture, where everyone here is successful and treats their job as their own little company."

Of course, challenges lie ahead. There are signs that the Florida condo boom is beginning to slow, and a continued escalation in steel-stud prices and spot shortages of labor make bidding difficult. Still, Wal-Mark has plenty of work lined up, and Barnhart believes the company will continue to grow.

WAL-MARK CONTRACTING GROUP / PAGE 5

“We enjoy securing the work, watching the projects get built and seeing them turn out successful,” said Barnhart. “That’s why I believe we will continue to do well. We all have the right motivation.”

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