

One of the Good Guys

After more than three decades in the ice arena industry, Jim Becker's business philosophy hasn't changed — nor has his reputation.

by Lori Fairchild

In an industry that has seen its share of ups and downs, twists and turns, comings and goings, maintaining an outstanding reputation over the long term is no easy feat.

For Jim Becker, it's all about knowing your business and always — ALWAYS — putting the customer first. "If you go out of your way to help people, there's a return that you can't measure," says the owner and president of Burnsville, Minn.-based Becker Arena Products.

It sounds obvious, but obvious doesn't necessarily translate to effortless. Like most successful entrepreneurs, Becker has paid his dues.

A lifelong resident of Minnesota, he played youth hockey and intramurals but had no professional aspirations in the ice arena industry. In fact, he started college as a physical therapy major. But when he took a hiatus from the classroom, a buddy's father offered him a job driving the ice resurfer at the Minnetonka Ice Arena. A year later he moved into the assistant manager's position. When Holmsten Ice Rinks approached him with a job in customer service, he seized the opportunity and moved up the ranks, eventually serving as its sales manager. A career — and a professional reputation — had begun taking shape. Physical therapy's loss was the ice arena industry's gain.

After working with a couple of other organizations, Becker got the entrepreneurial itch. He launched Becker and Associates in 1988, along with his wife and business partner, Gail. The company started with an Olympia dealership, a few ice rink supplies and dasher board sales for a local manufacturer. In 1994, the company became known as Becker Arena Products and began manufacturing dasher boards. Today it comprises three divisions: the Olympia dealership, which encompasses the 33 western states; the in-house manufacturing division; and arena services/catalog sales, which includes rink renewables from ice paint to rubber flooring, shovels to squeegees.

"We really pride ourselves on our catalog sales division; we always have people available for the customer to talk to, and we return calls as quickly as we can," Becker says. It's having a variety of good quality products and the knowledge of how to use those products that set us apart."

Another key to success, he adds, is making certain that the customer-service philosophy is passed on to the employees. And he says his management style is simple: "I basically lead by example and try to create an environment that allows employees to come to work and enjoy what they're doing."

The company does business throughout North America and beyond, including Europe, Asia and Russia. Its dasher board system was chosen for the main men's hockey venue at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano. "Other than that high-profile project, though, we really focus more on the community rinks," says Becker.

Gary Pietig, manager of the Apple Valley Sports Arena in Apple Valley, Minn., has worked with Becker for years. "When you strike up a good business relationship, if they're good people, you tend to stay with them. Jim is a very honest businessman, and very good in customer relations," Pietig says. "With any business, if you don't have good customer service, you're not going to be successful. It's obvious that Jim has recognized that from day one."

The ice arena and skating industry is a close-knit group, points out Jim Hartnett, a sales manager for Cimco Refrigeration. "You wind up being friends, competitors and even business partners with some of the same people. Jim [Becker] is one of the good guys in this industry. He's well-respected across the whole country, with a reputation as a square shooter. Everybody likes Jim."

A longtime member and advocate of ISI, Becker looks forward to the industry conference and tradeshow each year. "It gives us an opportunity



Jim Becker

to introduce new products and to meet the customer without having to travel to every rink in the country. We see more international business at IACT than at any other tradeshow."

Becker says he and Gail have met wonderful people and enjoyed the opportunity to travel the world. Working with their spouses has become a way of life for the Beckers. "We have a fantastic relationship," he says. "The business has never gotten in the way of our relationship." They have three children: Chad, who works for them in customer service; Tracy, who is married and the mother of their granddaughter, Emma, 2, and a grandson on the way; and Lindsay, a college junior.

The couple keeps a measure of balance in their lives by taking the occasional hiking trip to Arizona or Lake Superior. Jim also enjoys biking, hunting and fishing with his son.

After 31 years in the business, Becker is still passionate about the industry that seemingly chose him. He says the greatest challenge is its seasonality, and the biggest changes he's observed during his career have been the globalization of the business and the increased competition. But, using the common-sense approach that keeps him grounded, he says, "You just have to work a little bit harder." ■