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Contractor to Contractor
MCAA member contractors respond to the industry issues of the day.

Fred Kinateder

Fred Kinateder Masonry Inc.
Waukesha, Wisc.

For two decades, Fred Kinateder Masonry Inc. (FKMI) has been revered as an industry leader in Southeastern Wisconsin, winning dozens of excellence awards and working on such prestigious projects as the Milwaukee Theatre and Miller Park. Engineering News-Record (ENR) has consistently ranked FKMI as one of its top mason contractors in the country, and clients have applauded FKMI's team dynamic, timeliness, professionalism and vigilance to safety concerns. The man behind it all, owner Fred Kinateder, spoke with us about FKMI's history, growth, successes and business approach.

Masonry: Since the inception of your company two decades ago, what do you think have been the keys to your company's success?



Kinateder: We really pride ourselves on doing a good job and making sure we do things right the first time. Now, that doesn't always happen, unfortunately, but we still make sure that if something does go wrong, we take care of it and stand behind our work.

The other thing is that we've always looked at our people that work for us as a resource — as a very valuable resource. So, we've tried to take care of them and make sure that they have the safest possible working environment. I think that's one of the best ways. ... We have a core group of guys we always try to keep busy and keep working to avoid peaks and valleys where guys are laid off, then you hire them back, then they're laid off. We try to make it so it's a full-time, year-round job for them, which is quite a challenge.

Masonry: Your mission statement stresses the need for "controlled growth" of the company. What strategies are you utilizing to achieve this goal?

Kinateder: When we started it was pretty easy. There were some contractors that had — near that time — retired, so there was a void in the market. Because it was our goal to do the best job possible, the growth took care of itself. We were in demand and a lot of people wanted us on their job. Because safety has become such a big issue for general contractors, they also wanted us on their jobs. We had some big projects in this area going, so it was pretty easy to grow.



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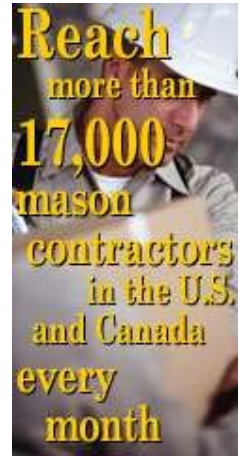
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Now, we're looking at some other things. We're looking at installing some other materials to add to our growth. We have a subsidiary company that installs air barriers and does caulking and brick washing. We're installing some precast and stone panels and trying to get into that market. Geographically, we've expanded out to some other areas in Wisconsin, looking for work or looking for other jobs. Consequently, we're building up some relationships with some of the generals that work in those areas.

Masonry: Since February 2005, FKMI has participated in the Chase-Wisconsin Partnership program, which recognizes the importance of safe work environments. How has participation in this program strengthened your work environment and allowed day-to-day operations to run more smoothly? What can you say for companies that neglect these safety practices?



Kinateder: The Chase partnership was developed between the AGC and OSHA here and it's received some of the normal regulations. It's given us a good relationship with OSHA. It's improved our relationship with the general contractors. And again, it protects our workers, who, like I said, we look at as a resource. We're making a safe work environment for them, so most of the guys really like coming back to work. Guys that have worked here for a while see how we do things. If they go and work somewhere else, and if there's an opportunity to come back, they always do. We're really getting positive feedback from the field about that.



The other thing is that, financially, it's improved our MOD rate and helps with our workman's comp insurance cost. I know it seems like it costs you money on the front end, but in the long run, you're protecting your workers, you're making a better

workplace for them, and you're getting returns on the workman's comp. It is such a focus with general contractors and a lot of the larger corporate customers right now, it's going to help get you in the door.

Masonry: Since 1993, your company has received nearly 20 awards for its quality work and efficient construction, and has been ranked by ENR as one of the top 25 mason contractors in the country for the past 13 years. What are your main strategies in keeping a high caliber company over the long term?

Kinateder: I stay involved and get anybody else involved — my sons are starting to get involved in the company now. We try to train them about the quality and the things that are important to us — you have to keep stressing that. You can't ever let that go. We stress to the people in the field and in our dealings with them that we want qualified individuals. I've been on the apprenticeship program for a lot of years and we stress it with the apprentices so that we're training them to learn that right away.

Masonry: Your company places a strong emphasis on teamwork, and past clients have commended your team's ability to work diligently, quickly and professionally. To what do you attribute your company's success in teamwork and how does it impact performance?

Kinateder: One of the things we've always stressed is that it's really

easy to get tunnel vision when you're dealing with somebody and you think that you're not being treated fairly. What I've always tried to stress to the guys here is that you have to look at it from the customer's standpoint. They have an expectation of what their building is going to be, and, if we don't live up to that, we're not going to get repeat business.

Rather than fighting or having a contentious relationship, I try to get everybody to look at it from the customers' side and what their expectations are. If their expectations are realistic and fair, then we have to perform up to that standard.

Masonry: FKMI specializes in projects that have unique requirements, such as site restrictions, exceptional detail or compressed schedules. Tell us about a few unique jobs or challenges that you've come across and how you've overcome the obstacles.

Kinateder: This one's kind of hard because I guess there's a unique challenge for each one. The big challenges we're seeing right now are the site restrictions and requirements. We're building in a lot of urban areas, such as downtown Milwaukee, where you just don't have any room to work — the building is right up to the street. And they all have compressed schedules, naturally.

We did the Milwaukee theatre and Miller Park. ... Both of those had a lot of other obstacles there, just because of the sheer size.



With site restrictions, we really try to stay up-to-date on equipment. We just purchased a Potain tower crane because we had two jobs where we couldn't get to the back side of the building. With this crane, we could swing right over the top of the building and land our materials on scaffolds. We really don't spare any expense on equipment if it gives us an edge.

With compressed schedules, one thing we do is look at their milestone dates and work backwards. We figure out what we need to do to get there and then we make sure and let the generals or construction managers know if they're holding us up, how they can help us, or if they're hurting us. If they have a milestone date and there's something that's got to go before us that's not performing, we stay on top of that.

Masonry: What do you feel is the biggest misconception about the masonry industry?

Kinateder: I think the biggest misconception — and there are a lot of them — is that, as far as materials, we're expensive compared to other materials. That, to me, is a real misconception because they're not taking into consideration the lifecycle cost; all they're looking at is the front end.

Masonry: What would you do to change that misconception?

Kinateder: We have to educate the people that are buying our products and show them that lifecycle costing. The International Masonry Institute has come up with a program for doing that and they're in the process of rolling that out right now. If we can get the purchaser and

the end-user to understand that block partition walls might cost you more on the front-end than drywall, but when you look at your maintenance and the rest of your lifecycle costs, block partition walls really aren't more expensive. I'm just using that as an example, but there are a lot of other things that go right down the line with that.

Masonry: What are your three biggest concerns in keeping your company successful?

Kinateder: Having an adequate workforce would be one.

Probably my top concern is that general contractors and construction managers are too focused on price over quality. When they're bid shopping or bringing in contractors who aren't qualified to bid on some kinds of jobs — the work somebody's priced on — they'll sacrifice quality.

The other thing would be government regulations. What I've seen in the last 30 years that I've been involved in this business — how much more regulated we are — it really makes it tough to do business. And I'm not just talking about OSHA; I'm talking about all the other regulations right on down the line.

Masonry: Where do you think the masonry industry is going to be 10 years from now?

Kinateder: I think that it's going to be healthy, because promotionally, we're doing more stuff now than we ever have and we're getting associations to work better together. The mason contractor's, IMI, ICE — we're all starting to pull in the same direction. We haven't been conflicting with each other. When we work together as a whole, rather than being fragmented, I think the industry's going to benefit from that.

Masonry: What do you think will be the masonry industry's biggest competitor in 10 years?

Kinateder: I would think that panelization is going to be our biggest competitor, and there are two ways to look at that. What we're trying to do when you talk about growing and expansion, is looking at just all pre-cast panels. If that's going to be the wave of the future, then we're going to try to get in on it and do some of the installation. It still could be some of our work. It's not going to be traditional masonry work where you have a guy out on a wall, laying the brick individually. We should be installing the pre-cast panel. I think we need to look at installing other materials.

Masonry: What do you feel are the most critical issues you'll face with future government regulations?

Kinateder: Succession planning is a big issue. OSHA, naturally, is a big issue. But in our company, for instance, with OSHA and the Chase-Wisconsin partnership program, we're taking that head-on. I don't believe in leaving these issues for somebody else to figure out. We try to face up to them.



Succession planning is pretty tough. It turns into a huge tax issue for closely held businesses like mine, where it's going to get passed on to the next generation. You have these huge tax impediments to doing that.

The other thing is that there are a lot of [regulations]. Talk about EPA issues — I've got 25 forklifts and if I have to go in and start retrofitting all of them to burn low-sulfur diesel, all that kind of stuff is an expense.

The list goes on and on. You have to stay on top of it.

Masonry: Which group do you feel has the bigger impact on masonry's future: architects, engineers or general contractors?

Kinateder: I would probably say general contractors. Engineers basically don't know much about masonry, one way or the other. They don't have the opportunities in engineering school to take masonry courses. You're always up against engineers because they design basically with steel or concrete.

Most architects love masonry. They like the way it looks, they like the things you can do with it, and that it's such a variable product. There are so many ways that they can achieve the look they're going for.

General contractors are really the ones who are the problem for mason contractors. It really should be general contractors/construction managers, because with the advent of construction managers in the last 20 years, we find ourselves getting value-engineered out, or a portion of our work being value-engineered out. There again, it's not a value for the long run — it's just an up-front cost that they figure they can cut, so, they hurt us more than anybody.

Masonry: What do you like most about being a member of MCAA?

Kinateder: The information you can get from dealing with other contractors from other parts of the country that have the same problems, or are in the same boat that you're in. When we go to the annual meeting, I talk to a lot of the guys and see how they handle things, and it gives me another way to look at it. Or I find out how they're doing things in other areas different from what I'm doing, and I think, "Well, I can change that." I would say it's the camaraderie, or dealing with peers on a level where we're not in competition. It really helps. I know it helps me in my business.

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