

# The Business Journal

Serving the Triangle's Business Communities

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## Siding with the customers on service

By Matthew Burns

**DURHAM** -- The image of Danny DeVito and Richard Dreyfuss trying to one-up each other in lowball tactics to sell aluminum siding in the 1987 movie "Tin Men" still haunts Jeff Monsein.

Monsein, president of Aluminum Company of North Carolina, cringes when he thinks of the sales tricks employed in the movie. But he acknowledges that siding dealers have been painted as con men and hucksters for a long time.

"The home improvement industry as a whole has to battle (a bad image)," Monsein says, noting the industry annually draws the most consumer inquiries to the Better Business Bureau. "It's a constant battle, but that's why we work so hard on customer service."

Service has been key for the Aluminum Company since Monsein's late father, Melvin, founded it in 1961. The elder Monsein moved his family from Pittsburgh to Durham to set up his own business and figured home improvements were a good bet.

Jeff Monsein started selling siding in high school and took over the business 16 years ago. Since then, it's grown from about \$1 million to \$8 million in annual revenue, and it now sells custom replacement windows and doors, roofing, gutters, carports and awnings in addition to siding. An affiliated company also provides financing for homeowners who can't afford to pay in full.

Twenty-two work crews handle renovation jobs from Greensboro to Goldsboro, and Monsein says the company could probably expand even faster if he could find enough quality workers.

Although he regularly advertises job openings in industry publications, he has found his dealings with immigration lawyers much more beneficial of late. The firm now has workers from Korea, Finland and the Czech Republic, some of whom he describes as "craftsmen" in customizing doors and windows and hanging siding.

"Our Korean crew wears white gloves when they do a job," he says. "These people don't talk much, but the customers don't care when they see what a great job they do."

The Aluminum Company doesn't do interior improvements, like adding rooms or remodeling kitchens, choosing to focus on its niche of home exterior products.

"It's frustrating for customers and us, and it probably costs us a lot of business," Monsein says. "We can't be everything to everybody and do it all well, so we just stick with what we know."



Even that has become more difficult. The company sold just four colors of siding initially, but it now offers dozens of shades and up to 50 options in bay windows. And sometimes, customers know more about the products than Monsein and his four salesmen.

Monsein tells the story of a man who called up recently asking about "VT ratings" on windows. Monsein had to call a few different people at the manufacturer before finding out that VT stood for "visual transmission" so he could get the information the man wanted.

"Customers are much more educated now with the Internet," he says. "We need to be professional and stay on top of what we're selling."

That is what he sees as separating the Aluminum Company from home improvement retailers like Home Depot and Lowe's.

"You walk in a store and see racks of doors, but

they're all stock sizes, nothing customized," he says.

"They cater to the masses. But they don't come close to knowing everything they sell or providing any service beyond the sale."

By comparison, the Aluminum Company requires no payments until the work is complete and provides lifetime warranties on all of its work. Monsein also gives his office and mobile phone numbers out to most customers in case they have any complaints.

He points with pride to a binder in his office stuffed with letters from satisfied customers dating back more than 30 years, many of whom end up referring other customers to the firm. The most recent entry: A March 12 note from a Chapel Hill man who was astonished the company would readily replace windows he had purchased there 17 years ago because a seal had failed.

"I'm not trying to paint a halo on, because we're not perfect," Monsein says. "We just try to do what we say we will."

He may not be saintly, but he is an active evangelist for his firm: He serves as pitchman in radio advertisements that regularly run on WTRG-FM, WRBZ-AM, WPTF-AM and WDNC-AM, and he credits the consistent message about the benefits of vinyl siding and replacement windows for drawing in much of the company's business.

"What better person to do the ads than the owner of the company?" he says. "No one believes in the product or the service more than me, and that gets through to people."

### ▼ ALUMINUM COMPANY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Business focus: **Sells and installs exterior home improvement products.**

Founded: **1961**  
President: **Jeff Monsein**  
Employees: **70-80**  
Location: **1335 Hamlin Road, Durham**  
Web site: **www.aluminumcompany.com**  
Tip: **Believe in what you sell and back up your sales with service.**