

Speed and quality add up

Innovative Contracting Solutions is on fast track

Jun 13, 2004, 11:00pm CDT Updated: Jun 10, 2004, 11:49am CDT

Matt Hubbard at 22 had the world by the tail. He gave up his senior year at Auburn in the fall of 1998 to renovate interiors of existing Blockbuster video stores and build some new ones. He found himself with a cool \$75,000 in the bank.

"I initially thought I'd make a little beer money for college. After four months, I paid for a Z-71 (truck)," says the 28-year-old Hubbard.

With his newfound success, he gave up on finishing his industrial engineering degree, invested \$30,000 in an office and opened up shop as Innovative Contracting Solutions Inc. (ICS) in early 1999, with a goal of doing interior construction for retail stores, restaurants and offices.

Then the Blockbuster project came to an end.

"Work wasn't so easy to come by. We sat around three or four months without a job," recalls Hubbard, a Pell City native. "That's when reality set in and I thought maybe we had made a mistake."

A moment of clarity followed.

"I was out traveling on the road, working my butt off" to win the business of out-of-town franchises, Hubbard says.

"But I realized I wasn't back at the office, pricing and selling work. I thought, 'Let me start selling in town instead of running the road.' "

And that's what he did, from six in the morning until eight at night, mailing out information and calling prospects.

"Fear drove me more than anything else," says Hubbard, a personable, transparent guy, described by friends and colleagues as an honest straight-shooter. "I had just bought a \$30,000 building and my butt was on the line."

But the business rolled in. He now does most of the interior build-outs for retail stores at The Summit, owned by Bayer Properties Inc., and has done several at Riverchase Galleria. ICS's client list includes Little Caesar's, Movie Gallery and CiCi's Pizza.

He's currently building interiors for the new Wolf Camera store at Patton Creek and the Liberty Mutual office in Galleria Towers. And, he's taking a stab at constructing buildings, including a new Guthrie's restaurant in Huntsville.

Fast - and good

Hubbard has employed a strategy that sets him apart: doing quality work quickly.

"We're known for cutting 25 percent to 50 percent off the normal (construction) schedule," Hubbard says. "We get these stores open faster than anyone else."



Owner Matt Hubbard, left, focuses on efficiency in selling as well as producing. He is joined at the ICS Interior build-out for the new Wolf Camera store at Patton Creek by vice president Kevin Harper, center, and project manager Randy Sellers.

It's all about saving money for clients.

"If somebody is spending \$100,000 with you, and the project is supposed to take four weeks, for every week a retail store or restaurant is not open, they're losing \$10,000 worth of revenue," he says. "In our line of work, we're trying to beat these schedules."

And that he does.

"Matt grabs the bull by the horns and goes to town," says Mike Land, a sales rep at Central Fire Protection Inc., which provides sprinkler and fire protection systems to ICS as a subcontractor. "They're known by their ability to turn a job around way quicker than anyone else could. Their effort so far is fast-turn jobs, and they've created their own little niche."

Pat Thetford, senior project manager at Bayer Properties, also has noticed.

"After a lease is signed, you have turnover dates that are obligations to the tenants," Thetford says. "(ICS has) been very successful turning it over quickly, with good quality too."

Rough on subs

Hubbard's strategy is a reflection of his personality.

"People say it's a little bit of being a perfectionist and having obsessive-compulsive disorder," he says with a laugh.

"But it's been my goal to always be my best at this and leave customers with a lasting perception that those guys did it right and on time."

He acknowledges that credo makes him a tough boss.

"A lot of subcontractors can't work for us because of that. Some won't because of the way we push a job," he says. "All the subs who work for us, day in and day out, tell us, 'You guys run jobs differently.' "

There's more to Matt Hubbard than speed, says Bayer's Thetford.

"We rarely get change orders from them. They're extremely reliable. I have a lot of confidence in him," Thetford says. "He's a young man with good character. I like doing business with him."

Greg Hess, a partner with The Shopping Center Group, chose ICS to build-out the WingStop restaurant in Center Point. His reaction?

"They spend their time more efficiently and effectively than most contractors, in searching for business, going to the source of the project, and establishing relationships with dealmakers," Hess says.

Meanwhile, Hudson predicts his company - which generated \$3.5 million in 2003 and expects to top \$5 million to \$6 million this year - will be doing \$50 million in 10 years by gradually expanding beyond Birmingham.

"More controlled growth is our mindset," Hudson says. "But that (\$50 million a year) is absolutely where we're going."

And at age 28, he's got some time to get there.

Gilbert Nicholson

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