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Small Biz Profile

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Not your father's plumber

Heffner & Associates strives to stand out in local market

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IBJ Reporter



IBJ Photo/Robin Jerstad

David Heffner is back to being a one-man company at Heffner & Associates LLC, which serves the metropolitan area.

David Heffner is not your average plumber. At least that's what his business card says. And his customers agree.

Even the name of his company, Heffner & Associates, belies the nature of his business. It's not that Heffner is ashamed of his profession. He just doesn't want to be lumped into what people often envision when they conjure up thoughts of the stereotypical serviceman with his pants hanging below his waist.

"I want to do everything I can to make sure this company portrays a professional image," Heffner said.

For Heffner, the son of an Episcopal priest, it's not just about image.

"It's doing what you say, being dependable and trustworthy every time," he said.

Heffner spent more than two years carefully constructing his company's reputation since its founding in 2001. Word spread--due to his Angie's List rating and his growing client list--that Heffner did high-quality, price-competitive work.

Within two years, Heffner's annual revenue grew to more than \$100,000. He decided to add staff and buy two additional trucks, outfitted with the latest technology. The costs were significant for a small business, but Heffner thought with his company's growth, he could handle them.

He hired a sewer-and-drain specialist in July 2003 and another licensed plumber in January 2004. But the gamble didn't pay off, and Heffner admitted the risks weren't as calculated as they could have been.

"I got a little ahead of myself," Heffner said. "I didn't have the proper processes in place."

The drain-and-sewer business didn't grow as quickly as Heffner anticipated, so he laid off one worker. After a few client complaints came in about his other help, Heffner was forced to downsize into an army of one again.

"I learned a lot of valuable lessons during that time," he said.

His firm's carefully crafted reputation took a hit, but Heffner is confident he can rebuild that. He is also busy paying off the debt of the added trucks, and is planning to sell one.

Heffner plans to remain a one-man company for the time being, but is developing procedures and protocols to assure that when his company does grow again, quality will not suffer.

Heffner learned discipline and organization as a U.S. Marine. The native New Yorker had long been good working with his hands and soon became a top-rate Marine helicopter mechanic.

After his military tour ended, Heffner became a licensed plumber, working in New York for two years. But after visiting a friend from the Marines in Indianapolis several times, he decided to move here in 1992.

"The city is clean, the lifestyle and the cost of living here is great, and I always really enjoyed it," Heffner said.

After Heffner earned his journeyman's license, he became displeased with the service many in the plumbing industry provided, including his own employers.

"I wanted to do higher-quality work with personal service, so I went out on my own," Heffner said. "Now I'm really living the American dream."

Many of Heffner's clients also feel like they're living a dream after working with him.

"He's our first call on every one of our plumbing problems," said Shawn O'Keefe, Bank One property manager. "Reliable service isn't always easy to find. But we've been using David Heffner for four or five years, and he's always been extremely reliable and fair on price."

Daryl Thompson, a new homeowner in the last year, doesn't hesitate to refer people to Heffner.

"David's service is second to none, and he provides a personal touch that's hard to find," Thompson said.

While service and emergency repairs represent 91 percent of his business, Heffner is hopeful kitchen and bathroom remodeling will be a major growth component for his firm.

Inspired by his two daughters, Heffner has designed what he calls a "children-friendly bathroom."

"I developed the CFB for both my daughters several years ago as they were gaining their independence as toddlers," he said.

Heffner installs motion detectors that automatically turn on lights. He installs a special toilet with a soft plastic seat and cover and hydraulic hinges to eliminate slamming seats. He also includes a hands-free faucet that uses a motion detector to turn water on and off.

Heffner & Associates LLC

Location: 8050 Winterset Circle

Phone: 248-9668

E-mail: David@HeffnerandAssociates.com

Web site: www.HeffnerandAssociates.com

Founded: 2001

Founder/owner: David C. Heffner

Service: residential plumbing

Employees: none

Revenue (last 12 months): \$230,000

One-year goal: expand market share throughout city, but especially on west side and in Hendricks County; pay down debt

Industry outlook: Business is expected to grow 3 percent to 5 percent in the next year, pushed by remodeling and upgraded fixture replacement.

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