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Consolidated Construction Co. rolls with changes

New ownership spurs evolution at Appleton design-build firm

By Judy Waggoner

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Change is inevitable, and many business gurus advise that to remain successful and competitive in a global market, companies must change and do so quickly.

Wait to make changes and competitors will leapfrog over slower, static firms.

While a philosophy of revolution may have worked for former GE CEO Jack Welch, Rick Bickert, Mark Schwei, Jim Perras and Pam Talevera, majority shareholders of Consolidated Construction Co., were firmly opposed to that method of change.

"When you create a turnabout in a hurry, you leave a lot of dead bodies in the wake, and we didn't do that here," said Schwei, executive vice president.

However, Consolidated has evolved from straightforward, reliable erector of metal buildings that often did not have much curb appeal into an award-winning design-build firm with a division devoted to the hospitality sector.

A look back

Brothers Melvin and Alvyn Novotny founded a metal building construction firm in North Dakota in 1950, focusing mainly in agricultural, industrial and commercial industries.

Moving the family-owned business to Appleton in 1964 resulted in increased sales and a diversified project base. The family's second generation



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Workers with Consolidated Construction Co. of Appleton install floor joists at the new \$6.7 million Cambria Suites on Evergreen Drive in Appleton. Since the company's beginning in 1950, Consolidated Construction successfully has evolved into a design-build company with a diverse base of commercial projects. Post-Crescent photo by Patrick Ferron
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Bio in brief

Consolidated Construction Co.
4300 N. Richmond St., Appleton
What they do: Design-build construction, general contracting and construction management for commercial, retail, hospitality, medical, manufacturing and industrial clients
Founded: 1950
Number of employees: 125
Area projects of note: Boyland Acura, Grand Chute; Custom Marine, Neenah; Van Dyn Hoven Imports, Grand Chute; Prospera Credit Union, Appleton; Coating Excellence International, Wrightstown; Village at Bay Park, Green Bay; ERG/Commercial Horizons, Appleton; Country Inn & Suites, Ground Round and The Meadows, Green Bay
Awards: Associated Builders and Contractors Wisconsin Projects of Distinction — General Construction-Industrial over \$3 million (Airgas, Appleton); General Construction-Metal Building over \$1 million (Village at Bay Park, Ashwaubenon); Merit (Fox Valley Human Association, Grand Chute)

Consolidated construction Co. timeline

assumed management of the company in 1984.

When it became clear in 2002 that a third generation succession would not happen, 15 key employees acquired minority ownership in the company. Bickert was hired as the first non-Novotny family president and given a mandate to form a management team that would eventually buy the company.

"One of the first things we did as a new ownership team is establish our corporate values — pro-activity, integrity, trustworthiness and accountability," said Jim Perras, vice president.

Consolidated shareholders finalized the purchase last fall.

"The previous owners did a very good job, but they allowed us to take over and take it to another level at our pace," Schwei said.

"We realized that the company was headed in a direction and require performance to be at a different level than where it was in the past because of the type of projects that we were about to move into."

Different skill sets are needed to evolve into a builder of sophisticated projects, such as a hotel or office building.

"We worked hard with the existing staff, finding new fits or training to improve skill sets, and it wasn't a revolution yet we changed almost as fast because we didn't have to exchange a lot of head count," Schwei explained.

New projects

Consolidated has grown dramatically in the last three years due in part to the opportunities they have found in the hospitality sector and innovations they have adapted to the design-build process.

Component, or panelized, construction was used in building the Country Inn & Suites in Green Bay allowing for it to be enclosed more quickly than if a conventional stick-built framing process was used.

Finishing on schedule is especially critical when building a hotel and convention facility because rooms are often pre-sold and conference rooms pre-booked.

1950: Twin brothers Melvin and Alvyn Novotny start the company in North Dakota. They focus on buildings related to the agriculture sector.

1964: Consolidated Construction Co. Inc. moves to Appleton and acquires a steel-building franchise. Employs between six and eight people.

1981: Company moves to current home on N. Richmond Street in Appleton. This site was formerly home to the Woodlawn School.

1985: Company sold to second generation of Novotny family — William Novotny, Robert Novotny, Richard Novotny, Trent Novotny and Richard Sweere.

1988: Midwest Properties is created to develop and own commercial and industrial properties.

2001: Novotny family sells minority ownership in the company to 15 key employees.

2002: Rick Bickert joins Consolidated as the first nonfamily president. While leading the company, Consolidated's sales have grown 300 percent.

2005: Consolidated builds its first office building — Employment Resource Group and Commercial Horizons on Destination Drive in south Appleton.

2006: Novotny family sells Consolidated to Bickert and three other top company managers for an undisclosed price. The Novotny family decides to put focus on their other business, Midwest Properties.

Compiled by Judy Waggoner

On the Web

Consolidated Construction Co:

<http://www.consolidated-const.com/>

Country Inn & Suites in Green Bay was the first project Consolidated built for Swift Hospitality Group based in Freeport, Ill.

"It was a positive experience; they brought the project in on time, under budget and with high-quality workmanship; you can't ask for more than that," said Dave Swift, president and chief executive officer.

A \$6.7 million, over 100-room Cambria Suites — a new brand developed by Choice Hotels — currently is under construction on Appleton's north side and is the second project shared by Consolidated and Swift Hospitality. It is scheduled to open in mid-August.

Consolidated's ability to "marry design and budget expertise" is another innovation they bring to projects like the 92,220-square-foot building for Custom Marine in Neenah, Schwei said.

"We were especially happy with the way their team worked with us in the design and estimating phases to hit our cost targets," said Dave Bowers, president and chief executive officer of CompX International, the firm that contracted with Consolidated.

Consolidated Construction successfully has evolved into a design-build company with a diverse base of commercial projects. Innovations, such as open-book pricing with competitively bid subcontractor work, panelized construction and increased value with lower cost in material choices are linchpins of the company's renaissance.

"We're not afraid to make investments in people and technology if it drives performance and profitability," Rickert said.