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A Green-led Re-Launch

By Patrick O'Toole

Harvey Building Products is pitching its 30,000 remodeler, contractor and builder customers to re-energize their businesses with green products

Harvey Building Products, a distribution firm and window maker with a network of showrooms and supply centers from New England to the Mid-Atlantic, is boosting its training and embracing green as a way to help contractors take full advantage of the coming recovery. CEO Erik Jarnryd says its time for contractors to be proactive.

QR | Your firm plans to conduct 11 trade shows in places like Boston's Gillette Stadium in 2010 with up to 2,000 contractors attending each day. You are also boosting your training at all of your locations. Why are you doing it?

Jarnryd | We think that some of our customers have gotten a little bit careful, a little bit conservative because of the slowdown over the last three or four years. In some cases, they have cut back on marketing and other expenses. We think it is time for them to step up their game. First of all, they have to relaunch their marketing in time for the recovery. And if you are going to the expense of relaunching your marketing, what better way to do it than to add a new edge to what you do? I think they need to consider taking a look at the new products that we and other distributors carry. They need to take a look at metal roofing and fiber cement and a host of green products.

But they also need to get trained. We do a lot of training with contractors. We are asking our customers to step up and come back in and get back to basics. They need to relearn how to run a business for a recovery — and while they are doing that, become more innovative as well.

QR | Green building and remodeling is not new. Why is it different this time?

Jarnryd | Green is no longer a leap of faith. I think the time is now. We may have one more year of modest recovery before things take off and now is the time to jump on this thing and get yourself ready. Put your investment into it and just get ready to go. It has been a tough few years, but the very backend of a downturn is sometimes the most exciting part of the business cycle. We are getting ready to go. We are trying to get our contractors ready to go. So our message is 'get out there and get yourself going.'

This was confirmed at Greenbuild in Phoenix last month. I was struck by the energy of the exhibitors that I saw. It is almost like a reinvention of this sector of the economy that needed it badly. We are noticing that some of the green products are becoming more viable from a payback perspective. I was also struck by the relative youth of the exhibitors and attendees. If you are an Echo Boomer, that is the demographic that understands what is happening out there. I think, to a large degree, our business plan is driven by that. We are trying to anticipate what the future is going to look like.

QR | Are you finding that your "relaunch" theme is resonating with remodelers?

Jarnryd | Our remodelers primarily buy exterior products from us. Their skill sets have revolved around that particular application. We are looking to train remodelers on how to get them into some additional products like solar skylights, for example. When you ask them to do this, you are asking a traditional roofer to add some internal systems and capabilities as well. You have to be able to build a chase going down to the basement. So that is just one example of the ways we are trying to get remodelers to step up beyond what they traditionally do.

Generally, our contractors think that the marketplace is improving. A lot of them have backlogs. Some of them are concerned about this coming winter, but they are optimistic about 2010. The consensus is that there will be some growth. It is going to be fairly modest at first, but they see a recovery. They are definitely receptive to the message.


QR | Green remodeling seems to be a more organic, from the ground up, type of movement. You are choosing to push the other direction. Why?

Jarnryd | And that brings up another point about this whole initiative of getting into green products — it cannot be driven by the contractor. It has to be driven by manufacturers and distributors. It is up to us and to our competitors to do this because contractors are not going to do it themselves.

QR | Can you elaborate?

Jarnryd | Contractors and remodelers are too busy just going from job to job to be able to worry too much about this, to attend Greenbuild, to study. We are the ones with the resources. We are the ones with the product managers. We are the ones with the vendor relationships to really know what is coming down the pike. If we don't push change, nobody else will.



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