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Burke Agency



Burke Agency was founded in 1975 during a deep recession in Michigan. The agency survived this baptism by fire, and grew rapidly. In 2009, Burke Agency once again found itself threatened by a deep recession, when their local Michigan economy all but collapsed. Burke Agency survived this ordeal because of the experience, talent and dedication of their entire team, and because of the high quality manufacturers they represent, manufacturers who continued to invest in their companies, their products, and in the Michigan market.

Looking back to 1975, the United States was in a recession, which hit Michigan much harder than most states. The auto industry encountered a double edge threat with sky rocketing fuel prices and a huge influx of imported fuel efficient small cars. Despite these troubling times, George Burke, a plumbing/heating industry veteran, realized a need for a new type of agency and decided to start his own business.

In the 70's it was common to have Rep Agencies that specialized in a particular market. Often a manufacturer would have a "spec rep" that just called on the commercial market, or a "shelf rep", which called on distributors and focused on the residential market. However, George had the vision for an agency that offered excellent customer service and presented complete market representation to manufacturers. Reflecting back, George says, "It's a very dangerous time for reps when a recession hits, and a crazy time to start a rep business."

Joining their father in the business, John Burke in 1979 and Brian Burke in 1981, the agency experienced continuous growth and by 1989 the company employed 11 people. That same year, George retired and Burke Agency was purchased by John and Brian. By the year 2000, the company added another 19 employees and added a second sales office and warehouse in Grand Rapids, MI.

John and Brian remain dedicated to George Burke's original principles of setting the industry standard for customer service and providing manufacturers with a diversified sales force that cover all facets of the market place. "We developed specialist to cover various markets; residential, commercial, showroom, builder, plumber, institutions, you name it, we have it covered, because that is what our manufacturers demand," explains John.

Building on their father's legacy, John and Brian embraced continuous improvements to the business. Brian articulates, "We participate with AIM/R, which has provided us with continuing education, exposure to 'best practices' of rep peers through-out the country and a tremendous network of industry professionals to consult with." In addition, Brian is a graduate of the Certified Professional Manufacturers Representative (CPMR), a three week rep agency management certification program. CPMR is another excellent resource for continuing



Brian and John Burke

education. Due to AIMR and CPMR, Burke Agency is an advocate of developing budgets, and regular sales forecasts. "Our financial management proved to be an invaluable resource as we weathered the 'Great Recession' in 2009," Brian describes.

Hard times hit Michigan again! John depicts the difficult economic climate, "The 'Great Recession,' really started in Michigan in 2004, when GDP

began to fall. By 2008 it was apparent the Michigan economy was collapsing, and the national recession threatened to eliminate Michigan's auto industry and manufacturing base. June of 2009 was the low point as GM and Chrysler declared bankruptcy and it seemed the entire Michigan economy just moved towards a complete stop. Housing starts dropped from a historical average of 45,000 units, to only 3,000 units."

The prolonged recession had a profound impact on Burke Agency and dominated their weekly and monthly planning meetings. Over a 6 year period, and primarily through attrition, the staff fell to 11 people, the same number of employees as the company had back in 1989.

Despite these difficult challenges, Burke Agency continued on. "A company founded in dangerous times isn't going to let dangerous times keep them down," reports Brian. This defiant attitude rallied the company. Following a "bunker" mentality, the company protected their most valuable resource, their employees. They leaned on available resources such as AIM/R and CPMR, and having strong financial fundamentals in place helped guide Burke Agency through these arduous times.

Now for the good news! Starting in June of 2010, the Michigan economy began to turn the corner and grow. Brian reports, "2011 and 2012 were excellent years for the company! We were lean but hungry and sales rebounded rapidly. Today our team has expanded to 15 employees including 8 outside sales representatives. We have the most experienced and motivated team in Michigan and it's because of their efforts that Burke Agency survived and now is thriving."

"We attribute much of our continued success to the manufacturers that we represent and their investment into producing quality products and providing high levels of customer service. Delta Faucet has been with Burke Agency since 1975, and we have represented Bradford White, Charlotte Pipe & Foundry and Brass Craft Manufacturing for over 25 years. In addition we're proud to represent Church Seats and IPS Corporation," says John.

As for the future, Brian states, "No one is looking back at Burke Agency, and there are no plans to relax. Business is getting better each day and now we are busy in the best possible way. The future looks very bright!"

For more information or to contact the Burke Agency:
www.burkeagency.com