



Birkshire Developments

a clear distinction

Nine years ago, Mike Young's phone was ringing off the hook. People were calling to ask if he could help them with their building projects. After much contemplation, Young and his wife, Kim, decided to start a company, called Birkshire Developments. "We gave the business a shot, and we have been happy ever since," he says.

Located in Musquodoboit Harbour, Nova Scotia, Birkshire Developments offers a variety of construction services. “We do everything,” says Young, “from something as minor as putting in a window, to major strip mall projects. We are spreading out all the time. In fact, we just built some roads this year, which was new. We’re also getting ready to build wind farms.”

The bulk of the company’s revenue comes from residential construction, making up roughly 60 per cent. Commercial building accounts for 30 per cent of the business, and the other 10 per cent is made up of various projects, such as industrial work and odd-jobs.

Despite making gorgeous homes and buildings, Young remains modest about the company’s accomplishments. If you ask about what distinguishes Birkshire from the rest, Young will tell you “everyone thinks they’re the best”, so there’s no point entering the boasting competition. “A builder is a builder,” he maintains. “You’re either good or you’re not. We know we’re good, and so do our clients. That’s what matters.” In looking at their finished products, however, it’s clear there is a distinction. For starters, most of what they produce is custom designed. Second, their buildings are high-end, with no traces of cookie-cutters in sight. Young admits to making his own trim and interior detailing, but he retains his Maritime

humility. “Let’s face it, all we’re doing is just driving nails,” he says. “If it wasn’t one project, it would be another.”

Skills shortage

Birkshire Developments has not only grown in its offerings, it has also expanded its team. Starting with two people, the company now employs a total of 13, including Young and his wife. But if it were up to Young, he would have even more people on his team.

“We’re short on men right now,” says Young. “We’re having a hard time with that; actually, it’s one of the biggest challenges we’re facing. If there were five carpenters available tomorrow, we would take them all—labourers, too. There is no question about the skills shortage in the province.”

When asked about whether the Nova Scotia government is doing anything to rectify the situation, Young simply laughed. As far as he can tell, not enough is being done to encourage the trades.

Although the shortage looks bleak, the prov-



ince has recognised the problem. Skills Canada-Nova Scotia, for example, is a not-for-profit organization working with employers, educators, labour groups and government to reposition trade and technology-related careers. The organization is actively helping to raise awareness of the opportunities available in skilled trades and technologies to young people through various programs and competitions.

There is hope. In the meantime, however, companies such as Birkshire Developments are left wondering how to manage their work flow.

Meeting industry standards

These days, there are certain expectations customers have of their contractors. Like Young says, there are good builders and bad ones. Fortunately, there are ways for committed builders to showcase their dedication to their industry. Birkshire Developments seems to be familiar with these implicit standards.

One of the best things to do for tradespeople is get involved in industry associations for constant professional development. “We belong to the



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Nova Scotia Home Builders Association (NSHBA) and I sit on the Board of Directors for the Atlantic Home Building and Renovation Sector Council (AHB&RSC)," Young explains. "These associations keep us connected to industry trends."

Speaking of trends, it's no secret that green building is a growing movement in North America. Birkshire Developments has incorporated those principles into its offerings. "We're turning green slowly but surely," says Young. "More people are asking us for environmentally sustainable materials; they're getting serious about heat pumps, geothermal and solar considerations. Some want to re-use drain water—they extract the heat from the water, put it through a filter and use it again in their toilets. Consumers are more educated now and we're moving with them."

Up ahead

Birkshire Developments is a company with a future. Long term, Young is moving towards project management. "There are some big project management jobs coming up, and if we can get in there, we'll continue going that way," he adds. "I'm getting older now and I'm getting tired of swinging the hammer. I can't swing it forever!"

Retirement is still far off for 52-year-old Young. Even when the time comes, he doesn't see himself stepping back easily. "I want to be able to gear up the company, so I can work when I'm 75," he laughs. "Project management would work out well for me. I love what I do, and I don't really see myself stopping." **CBJ**



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