

Northeast Wisconsin

MARKETPLACE

November 4, 2008

www.marketplacemagazine.com

Magazine



Certified power

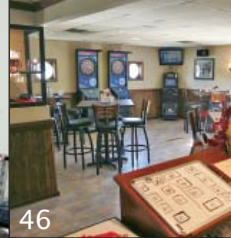
**NORTHERN ELECTRIC
INSTALLS ELECTRICAL
INFRASTRUCTURE
FOR COMMERCIAL AND
INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS**

Pictured are (clockwise from top) owners Jim Conard, Russ Morgan, Tracy Conard and Amy Vanney

**Special Insert:
Homes of Distinction**

**FOX CITIES/CALUMET COUNTY/
RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE/WORKFORCE/
TECHNOLOGY/FINANCIAL SERVICES**





FEATURES

- 14 **Four into one, and into one again**
Enzymatic Therapy CEO to speak at St. Norbert in November
- 16 **Design for Wisconsin**
Home design can maximize your enjoyment of Wisconsin's four seasons
- 22 **On the cover: Certified power**
Northern Electric installs infrastructure for commercial and industrial buildings, including the Lambeau Field atrium

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 38 **Fox Cities: Redeveloping the Fox**
Old buildings along the Fox River have new uses
- 44 **Calumet County: Filling Sherwood**
The village plans for downtown redevelopment with bank building purchase

INDUSTRY REPORTS

- 26 **Technology: The e-spy at work**
Employers have the right to monitor employees' computer and Web use. How much should they?
- 30 **Financial services: From GAAP to IFRS**
International accounting standards are on the way to replacing U.S. standards
- 32 **Workforce: How to create your home office**
Technological improvements allow more people to work at home
- 32 **Residential real estate: Planning now for building later**
You can spend your winter designing your home for spring or summer construction

MARKETPLACE MBA

- 18 **The right way to manage costs**
Cost management is too important for a business to leave it to the accountants

IN THE NEWS

- 12 **Election Day is Nov. 4; Enzymatic Therapy sold to German firm; Pierce gets \$10.7 million contract, Coast Guard deal questioned, Packers postpone Lambeau project**
Daily business news updates at www.marketplacetoday.com/blogs

BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

- 46 **"Sconnie" cuisine**
Sconnie's Pub and Eatery embodies Wisconsin entrepreneurship

DEPARTMENTS

- 7 Publisher's Note
- 8 Marketplace of Ideas
- 10 You Need to Read: *Whatever Happened to Thrift*
- 48 Technology
- 49 Around the Marketplace
- 57 Calendar
- 58 Questions for Paper Discovery Center

COMING UP

Dec. 2: Energy and utilities, financial services, transportation, Oshkosh, Waupaca County, New North Progress Report, and the Holiday Gift Guide

on the cover

Certified power

Steve Prestegard

Northern Electric installs electrical infrastructure for commercial and industrial buildings, including the Lambeau Field atrium



Northern Electric is owned by (from left) Russ Morgan, Tracy and Jim Conard, and Amy Vanney. Photos courtesy Ken Cobb

Here's one sign that a couple is serious about being in business: They discuss plans to create a new business on their honeymoon.

Tracy Conard was an entrepreneur. Jim Conard was an electrician. The couple's parents also had owned businesses; Jim's father owned a service station and Tracy's father was a Green Bay real estate appraiser.

The Conards' honeymoon project turned out to be Northern Electric Inc., a Green Bay electrical contractor whose projects extend from Lambeau Field to a Michigan casino to a Green Bay bridge.

We have a team atmosphere — nobody's too good for any job; it's definitely built on teamwork without question.

JIM CONARD

Northern Electric is one of Wisconsin's few electrical contractors certified by the state Department of Commerce as a Women's Business Enterprise, in which more than half of the company is owned by women. Contractors or project owners that have minority participation requirements can meet them by choosing certified women- or minority-owned businesses such as Northern Electric.

That certification was how Northern Electric was selected for the Lambeau Field project, which may have been the company's biggest project in terms of impact, says CEO and co-owner Tracy Conard — "for being a local contractor, a women's [certified] contractor, and being able to work with the Packers on the new stadium."

Most of the company's customers are commercial or industrial, although the company does institutional and high-end residential work as well. The company's service area covers about a 100-mile radius of Green Bay.

Since the company opened in 1992, says Tracy Conard, "We have

changed our business in the way of how we look at how we get business — more relationship-building, and I think that's how we kept afloat, because we do have great relationships with contractors."

"We have a team atmosphere — nobody's too good for any job; it's definitely built on teamwork without question," says co-owner and chief operations officer Jim Conard. "We'll tag-team together on projects and help each other out."

Like many contractors and subcontractors, Northern Electric has tried to get away from bid-based business, one impetus for the company

to get into electrical design-build, where the company designs and then installs its electrical infrastructure. Design-build works for subcontractors in the same way it works for general contractors.

"The hard-bid market is a nameless, faceless market; it's basically low-dollar," says Jim Conard. "A design-build contractor has to have faith that you'll

design a project within budget to the customers' needs.

"You're building a better and stronger relationship when you're with them in a conceptual stage. We're in touch with it every day, we price it every day, so we can meet that budget and design for their needs. If you're designing, you know what you're thinking when they designed it. When someone else does design, it's 'what were they thinking?' when they designed it."

That in turn helps reduce change orders during projects: "Collaboration reduces scope revisions, which not only cost money, but also costs time," says Jim Conard. "'Lean' means timely and efficient, and time is money."

"Building relationships with general contractors over the years, they're coming to us and saying, 'Northern, can you design this building for us?'" says Tracy Conard.

The company has two state-certified electrical system designers at its office, and 60 to 70 percent of the company's business is now in design-build, including the under-construction Bellin College of Nursing Shopko Campus in Bellevue, a 73,000-square-foot facility.

One notable feature of Northern Electric is its corporate-wide focus on safety as a generator of business. Since 2000, the company has gotten >>



Jim Conard (left) is Northern Electric's chief operating officer, and Russ Morgan is Northern's vice president and corporate safety director.

A CLOSER LOOK

NORTHERN ELECTRIC

Owners:

Tracy Conard (CEO),
Jim Conard (COO),
Amy Vanney (CFO),
Russ Morgan (vice president and corporate safety director)

Location: Green Bay

Year founded: 1992

What they do:

Electrical contractor (including design-build) for commercial, industrial, institutional and high-end residential customers

Employees: 35

Certifications:

Certified Women's Business Enterprise by Wisconsin Department of Commerce

On the Web:

www.nei-gb.com

Right: Amy Vanney (left) is Northern Electric's chief financial officer, and Tracy Conard is the company's CEO. Vanney's and Conard's ownership qualified the company to be a state Certified Women's Enterprise.

more than 20 safety awards from the Wisconsin Council on Safety, the state Department of Workforce Development, the Association of General Contractors of Wisconsin, and Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc.

Safety "is a huge deal; this entire business we're in is driven by safety," says Russ Morgan, a company owner and vice president and corporate safety director. "If your company doesn't have a good safety record, a lot of contractors don't want you on their work site."

The company implemented an employee safety incentive program in 1996. "The monetary level is minimal, but for them personally it's monumental," says Jim Conard. "Our employees took it to another level. For them it's a pride thing. Having the safety record and experience helps us to be competitive in this bid market."

Northern Electric's 35 employees (employment ranges up to 75 depending on the amount of business it has) includes five project managers and estimators with 120 years of combined experience. Of the company's current 30 field employees, Morgan estimates 20 of them knew each other before they went to work for Northern Electric.

The team or family atmosphere extends to the Conards' two golden retrievers, four-year-old Buck and one-year-old Bo, listed on Northern Electric's Web site as the company's managers of customer and employee relations.

Besides the Lambeau Field renovation project, the company's most notable work includes the Central Brown County Water Authority's water pipeline to Lake Michigan in Manitowoc, lighting on the Mason Street Bridge in Green Bay, and the Skipper Marine Quarterdeck Marina in Sturgeon Bay, where Northern Electric installed off-shore power and fuel dispensing, marina and ornamental lighting, electrical substations and power equipment. The company is currently working on the new Bellin College of Nursing campus in Bellevue.

Another unique project was the Island Resort and Casino in Harris, Mich., a casino owned by the Hannahville Indian Community in northwestern lower Michigan. Northern Electric decided not to bid on the casino project because of its 2½-hour distance north of Green Bay. One day after the bids were awarded, however, the general contractor contacted Northern Electric because the project was already over budget.

"Because of our relationship with the general contractor and the engineering firm, they said, let's sit down and come up with a viable plan to get this under budget so the owner can get a new casino," said Jim Conard. "We try to convey the message that when times get tough, we're going to do these projects at a different level or think out of the box, and that helps us secure projects. We want nothing more than our guys to be working."

In addition to installing electrical infrastructure, Northern Electric also provides electrical service with 24-hour trucks.

Born for business

Tracy Conard's father was Green Bay real estate appraiser Paul Quigley, a former Green Bay alderman and member of the city's Police and Fire Commission. Jim Conard's father operated a service station.

"Those years you got the day's business at the dinner table, and a business environment, more or less



it gets instilled in you," says Jim Conard. "I knew I was going to be in business; I just didn't know what."

"You see the benefits of being a business owner," says Tracy Conard. "The work ethic gets instilled in you."

Jim Conard's career path opened after he served an electrical apprenticeship. After Northern Electric opened, Tracy did the books, recruited employees and ordered supplies, while Jim started in the field before moving to estimating and project management.

Another company owner, chief financial officer Amy Vanney, came from not just a business background, but a construction background. Her father was a general contractor in Tomahawk, and Vanney came to Northern Electric from a large general contractor.

"I liked a woman-run company, because in larger companies you never got that opportunity; you're just a number," she says. "I felt my voice was heard here. I understood the construction process; I understood paperwork, what's really important."

The company's fourth owner, Morgan, had known Jim Conard's family his entire life. Morgan, "an old wrench turner from way back" rather than coming from a construction background, worked for another company when "one day I stopped over to talk to Jim, and I got to thinking, and one thing led to another."

Morgan started in charge of the company's equipment and added safety duties because, says Tracy, "he's in the field, and he has great attention to detail."

Northern Electric owns, rather than rents, all of its own equipment. "If you need a large lift to fix a light pole, you can call a rental company and it may not be available," says Morgan. "We have it in the back of our shop."

Northern Electric wants to get into more green work, including LEED-certified projects; the company recently completed its first LEED project. "You've got to see where the industry is heading," says Jim Conard, "and stay with it or ahead of it." **M**

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