

Knowing the Signs

SouthWood Could Have Written the Book...

Ernest Dwight is the first to admit that when he entered the signage business in 1970, he wasn't quite sure where it would take him. He was working in conjunction with his wife's embroidery business, but eventually saw more potential for growth with signage, so he made the decision to focus his energies there.

In the beginning, Dwight was running a one-man show. Before heading to the office, he would stop by the lumberyard and purchase the wood he needed for his current project. Then he would take it to the shop, rout it, write up an invoice, and head to the client's location after work to install it. Over time, he experienced a growing demand for the services he was offering and decided to capitalize on it.

One thing Dwight had learned, no matter what the industry, is that people were looking for service, dependability, and responsiveness. As he listened to his customers discuss their frustrations with companies that simply didn't follow through on their promises, he saw an opportunity to use this to his advantage, by merely staying true to his word. It is with this simple mantra that SouthWood Corporation began its existence.

Today, the company is recognized internationally as a premier signage solutions provider, with clients in every state and significant projects in wide-ranging locales from Grand Cayman to Mount Rushmore National Monument to Raffles Canouan Island Resort in The Grenadines.

Locally, SouthWood signs grace the properties of Ballantyne Village, Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens, Historic South End, Johnson & Wales University, Latta Pavilion, The Sanctuary, and Wachovia Corporation.



Ernest Dwight, President and Founder
SouthWood Corporation

Writing the Book

Throughout the years, SouthWood has earned its reputation for excellence, building upon the learning from each signage project completed.

"Initially, we just followed opportunities as they were coming to us. We tried to learn what we were doing right and correct the mistakes that we made along the way," comments Dwight.

One of the first projects attesting to the company's reputation and spurring Dwight to move forward was for Dallas-based Lincoln Properties when they came to Charlotte in the

1970s. Because of SouthWood's attention to detail and project follow-through, the company gained the respect of the architects on the project. As a result, SouthWood was called upon in later years to do additional projects outside of the Charlotte region.

"This was when we realized that people were willing to pay for the quality of the relationship and the service. They knew what they were going to get with us, and they were willing to pay a little more to have us do the job right," Dwight recalls.

SouthWood began its expansion into the Columbia, South Carolina, and Greensboro areas and from there, growth has moved at a rapid pace. "The architects we worked with referred us across industry boundaries, which really helped expand our business and clientele," says Dwight.

In 1975, Dwight attended his first architectural trade show, and found it a very re-affirming experience. He remembers, "After the show, I knew that we were sitting on something that hadn't quite been developed yet."

As the company's products were being requested by more and more architects, SouthWood decided to create a catalog of basic signs for prospective customers in an effort to keep up with the inquiries.

"Although this worked for a while, and we did get a lot of projects from it, we weren't building relationships," Dwight recalls. "We were also finding that the market was getting confused about what it was that we did and who we were."

By presenting their services in a catalog format, they were basically showing their competitors what they were doing—and allowing them to capitalize on business opportunities. Another downside of the catalog was that sales representatives were becoming little more than order takers. Because it was far easier to fill out an order form than it was to search for new ways to solve a problem, a large aspect of business was getting lost in the shuffle.

So, after using this "standard products from a catalog" approach for almost 10 years, SouthWood made the decision to go back to its roots—and focus more on custom signage projects. This was a move in the positive direction for Dwight because he thrived on the

personal interactions with his clients, helping to identify their needs and find ways to help them.

Dwight also began to see the importance of having an in-house design team to work with the clients and help them to determine the best signage solution. This move allowed them to branch out to more customers and become more of a comprehensive service provider.

With the addition of a design team and advances in computer technology, business was well positioned for growth. So when Dwight got a call from an architect about a project in Grand Cayman, he jumped at it.

"People on the islands have a high emphasis on dependability, and word had apparently gotten out that we were dependable. After completing one project, we were asked to do another and it continued from there," he comments. "Clients were looking for someone who was ready to stand by their word. That company turned out to be us, and we've really profited from that relationship."

Over the years, SouthWood has branched out to offer more services to its clients from wayfinding to the design, planning and creation of signage. "By branching out our services while staying dependable and responsive to the needs of our customers, we have been able to differentiate ourselves from our competitors," says Dwight.

One of SouthWood's most comprehensive local projects was signage for the corporate headquarters of Lowe's Home Improvement in Mooresville. SouthWood was responsible for designing, fabricating and installing interior signage and exterior regulatory signage to reflect the stone façade and curved architecture of the unique facility design. Parking signage was tied into the Lowe's store theme by identifying each floor with a Lowe's specialty—gardening, hardware, etc.

What a great job your staff did with design, production and installation of our sign package," Dwight recalls the praise of Warren Shinker, Lowe's director of facility operations. "The signs look great and the installation was smooth and efficient."

Signing an All-Star Team

Another way that SouthWood has been able to

differentiate itself from other companies is by being one of the best companies to work for from a family point of view. SouthWood prides itself on being named a "Family-Friendly Company" by *Charlotte Parent* magazine for five of the past six years.

When asked what SouthWood looks for in its employees, Dwight responds, "We are looking for team members with drive and ambition, and for people who are interested in learning and developing new skills."

Dwight says he trains all of his 50 employees to be "generalists," so they have a basic, working knowledge of all aspects of the business and how everything gets done. But at the same time, he works hard to avoid depending on any one person too much. This helps to create a synergy and cohesiveness among his team. "Everyone is an equal contributor. It is really about treating your employees the way you'd like to be treated and people appreciate that," Dwight comments.

Because of the nature of the company, multi-tasking is essential to all SouthWood employees. "We are looking for people who are not only versatile in their skills, but people who are able to take opportunities and learn from them."

It is easy to see Dwight's enthusiasm and dedication, and, as you walk through the plant, it is apparent that his employees share his sentiments. You can't help but notice the people taking pride in their work and being part of the SouthWood team, reflecting the guidance and mentoring of their "coach" who keeps a hand in the day-to-day work.

Nick Vasquez, who works in installation, comments, "Ernest is open to ideas and likes to hear our contributions. He offers support and solutions."

Dwight says he isn't a micro-manager and feels confident in

the abilities of his employees. Eric May, an installation manager, reaffirms this, "Ernest is here, overseeing everything, but he lets us do our jobs. But he is always there if you need him."

In the future, Dwight hopes his company will be looked upon as a place where everyone would like to work, but only the best can get a job there. Admitting that he'd rather coach a team of all-stars than rookies, Dwight feels it is worth it in the long run to spend the time finding the right people for the company. By having a high set of standards, Dwight says he is working to create an environment where the "good ones can thrive."

Richard Lockwood, in manufacturing, describes his job: "I do something different every day. There is always plenty of variety and something new to learn. We are getting real 'on the job' training. Ernest runs the business orderly and with precision. We all take pride in our work because he takes so much pride in us."

A Wide Open Canvas

Dwight notes that change is constant, and it is important to be ready to work with change instead of meeting it with resistance. He sees the future as a "wide open canvas."

"So far, we have gone where the market has taken us and that will continue in the years to come. We are going to continue to do what we are doing, just for more people."

If repeat business is any indication, SouthWood will continue to enjoy success. For the past eight years, Archstone-Smith Residential, owners, operators and developers of apartments in metropolitan areas nationwide, has turned to SouthWood to bring standardization and brand recognition to the Archstone name and communities. To date, SouthWood has provided signage to more than 300 Archstone properties.

SouthWood also has also provided signage for more than a dozen Marriott Vacation Ownership Resorts (timeshares) over the past 15 years, including properties in Myrtle Beach and, Hilton Head, South Carolina; Orlando, Florida; Breckenridge, Colorado; and Malaga, Spain.

SouthWood prides itself on doing things right the first time, so it lasts for the long haul. One of their goals for the future is to continue relaying the importance of signage to their customers and to the public.



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Principal: Ernest H. Dwight, Founder and President
Established: 1970
Employees: 50
Revenues: Over \$5 million (2006)
Business: Specializes in the creation and implementation of image-conscious custom signage and graphics; designs, plans, builds, installs and manages the process from concept to completion for clients through the United States, the Caribbean and beyond.
www.southwoodcorp.com

Dwight states, "We hope to challenge clients to understand the importance of signage, as it is their identity to the outside world. Signage is going to last a lot longer than an ad in the newspaper or a commercial on television. It is more than an investment; it is a fixed asset of the business."

As SouthWood has grown as a company, so has its involvement with the community. Donating signage to local non-profit organizations and charities is something Dwight tries to do whenever possible, stating, "You have to give back where you can; that is how we can help."

Growing just to say you are growing isn't the direction SouthWood is heading. They continue

to assess potential projects to ensure they are the right company for the job. This again shows their continued dedication to both their craft and their customers.

Dependability, responsiveness and accountability have helped SouthWood and Ernest Dwight find their way, and all signs are pointing toward a prosperous future.

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