

Take the Lead

CHARLOTTE
BUSINESS LEADERS
MOVING FORWARD

High quality is a sign of long-term success

BY STEVE HARRISON
sharrison@charlotteobserver.com

Ernest Dwight has been in the sign business since 1970, when he was 22.

After graduating from college, Dwight was helping his wife's embroidery business by putting team names on uniforms. A customer asked if he could make a wood sign for a cabin. He soon got the idea this could be a way to earn a living.



Dwight

He says he didn't know anything about the sign business - he was an economics major - but he enjoyed woodworking.

Dwight today sells his signs throughout the nation, and also to resorts and hotels in the Caribbean. In Charlotte, his clients include the Charlotte Area Transit System, Birkdale Village, Concord Regional Airport and Ballantyne Village.

The company, originally F&D Wooden Signs, expanded into making signs from stone, metal and synthetics.

Today, SouthWood Corp. has 50 employees in its 40,000-square-foot headquarters on Westinghouse Boulevard, in southwest Charlotte.

In a typical year, he'll have 200 clients.

He spoke last week with reporter Steve Harrison. Questions and answers are edited for length and clarity.

Q. What was your biggest mistake and how did you learn from it?

There were a couple of things. Back in the late 1970s, there was a significant

downturn in the economy, and real estate went into the tank. That made me keenly aware to diversify my client base, not to put all of my eggs in one basket. At the time we were doing all multi-family and resort work, and people quit building second homes. We also realized if we had a varied geographic base, we didn't have to worry about, say, the steel industry going in the tank.

The other lesson is to stay focused on what we do best. What we do is high-quality work for people who want things done right. Some years ago, I got led astray. I remember a sales person telling me there was a customer who just wanted to buy cheap crap. I followed that path, and I realized it's a big strategic mistake. If people want to buy something cheap, we won't sell it.

Q. How did you decide to go overseas?

We started in Charlotte and our clients were in Charlotte. But we had clients who went elsewhere, and they still called us. People began knowing us, and it took us farther and farther away. We got a call from an architect in the Caymans. Today it's 5 to 10 percent of our business (in the Caribbean) but it adds a little marketing twist and intrigue. And credibility.

Q. What are the challenges in doing business overseas?

It's not that difficult. You meet someone, and you get to know the personalities. Again, when we are finished manufacturing things, we put it in a box. It's not relevant how far it goes.

Q. Do you have a favorite sign or style?

I like things that I consider timeless designs - things that don't go out of style. It's nice, I'll be driving down a road in Cape Cod or Zion National Park, and I'll see a sign and say, "Oh, I did that."

Q. Nearly 40 years is a long time to be in one business. How do you keep it fresh and adjust to changes?

Our clients change, and we'll get aligned with new architectural trends. But what hasn't changed is the philosophy of being in the service business.

I just drove down the beach and took a picture of a sign in the Caymans that we installed 25 or 26 years ago. The only time our stuff gets replaced is when (the business) changes its brand, image or logo.

Take the Lead offers short conversations with leaders of small and mid-size Charlotte-area businesses. Know someone we should talk to? E-mail sjamieson@charlotteobserver.com.