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BizSmarts

Executive Profile

Tom DeMuth

President, Vernon Daniel
Associates



The basics

Background: DeMuth first dabbled in the landscape artistry business when he was a boy. Little did he suspect that it would become a full-time vocation. But DeMuth, 51, a one-time IBM Corp. finance and marketing executive, made a career switch 21 years ago to lead a landscape lighting company that has illuminated everything from Georgetown's posh backyards to George Washington's Mount Vernon.

Education: Bachelor's in finance, master's of business administration, Virginia Tech

First job: Cutting grass, raking leaves for a neighbor. I was paid \$1.35 an hour. To this day, he's probably still laughing at the good deal he got. Probably that was the point that I said I had better learn negotiation skills.

Family: Wife Janet, rescue puppy named Zuri; lives in D.C.

Business strategy

How's business? It's been an interesting last few years. But we've done OK. We've been very fortunate in that two years ago we started offering LED lighting systems, very energy-efficient, long-life light sources. So they've been extremely well-received by our clients. That's really helped us the last few years during this downturn. But we feel things are picking up.

Next big goal: To continue growing, increase sales and get back to where we were before 2009.

How do you keep a competitive edge? No. 1, we are up on technology, like LED. Even before we started using it two years ago, we were researching it for five years. Solar lighting is going to be a potential for us. And we specialize in lighting — that's all we do. We're not installing sprinkler systems, we're not doing landscaping or anything else. Each one of our designers was personally trained by [founder] Vernon Daniel. As a result, no cookie-cutter designs.

Judgment calls

Best business decision: Expanding the company. Going from just doing work in the Washington area to now having branch offices from where we can do work all up and down the East Coast.

Toughest projects: An office building, where you're using more architectural, special-designed fixtures that are out of the norm.

About lighting Mount Vernon: That was a really rewarding project for our company. We still maintain all the lighting at the mansion. But just the history, the importance of the property, what it represents. The unique items we were illuminating — the mansion, trees planted in George Washington's time that have history behind it, the tomb.

Biggest missed opportunity: We had the opportunity to provide a lighting design for the illumination of the Washington National Cathedral. Unfortunately we lost out to a lighting company in New York. That would have been a fun project.

True confessions

Personality in high school: Somewhat quiet, pretty good student, played soccer.

Your go-to karaoke song: I'm a terrible, terrible singer, and I wouldn't put anyone through that.

Favorite hobby: I really like sports, running, kayaking, I play a little golf. We have season tickets to the Hoyas. Reading. I sort of dabble in stained glass.

Car: A Toyota Rav4. It works out well for hauling animals and kayaks.

What would you do if not this? Be a professional golfer probably, but I think it is probably impossible considering my handicap is in the 20s. I think I'll be a starving golfer.

Favorite place outside of the office: The canal towpath for running, being able to kayak on the Potomac.

Pet peeve: When people are late. I try to be punctual, and I appreciate when other people are too.

What's on your iPod? I really like music, so I have all sorts: jazz, Latin, blues, rock, zydeco, gospel, classical, even some opera

Interview by Jarondakie Patrick