



The leadership team of Fox Valley Spring includes (l-to-r): Charly Klein, vice president of sales and marketing, Russ Stang Sr., founder and president, and Keith Wincentsen, vice president of operations.

## Customer Service-Oriented Growth A Profile of Fox Valley Spring Co.

by Gary McCoy

“We really are a customer service-oriented company,” explains Russ Stang Sr., founder and president of Fox Valley Spring Co. in Greenville, Wis. “Our motto is: ‘We’re the customer service company that happens to make springs.’”

Fox Valley Spring was established by Stang in 1989 because he saw a “need for a more customer-oriented company.” He had previously worked for another spring company for 21 years, beginning in high school as a work/study student before launching out on his own.

Stang initially started the business in a small facility in the Appleton area with two employees. Stang made the springs and an outside salesman was employed to find work for the fledging business. The company grew after just a year in business. Stang was quickly able to expand staff and move to a larger building. “We have grown every year since,” he explained.

### **If I Had a Hammer**

When I recently talked by phone with Stang and Charly Klein, vice president of sales and marketing for Fox Valley Spring, you could hear the sounds of construction going on in the background. In fact, the interview was conducted in the maintenance office, which is currently serving as Stang’s temporary office during Fox Valley Spring’s expansion project.

By the time this article is published, Fox Valley Spring employees should be fully utilizing a new and expanded facility. The expansion will double the size of

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He pauses and then says reflectively, "Of course the bottom line says it all. Without the bottom line you are not successful."

Fox Valley Spring's current plant from 25,000 sq. ft. to 53,000 sq. ft. The company has dedicated 7,000 sq. ft. to office space, while the balance of the facility will be divided between manufacturing and distribution. The addition will add enough space to house equipment for an expanded product line. It will also make shipping and receiving operations more efficient, and allow for future employee growth.

"We originally started to expand in 2008 when we saw the need for more technology for our customers," said Stang. The company put off the expansion due to the shaky state of the economy. But because of good interest rates and competitive construction rates, Stang said the expansion "just made sense" and they embarked on it in 2010.

"Financially, it's a good investment. I think we are going to be more efficient with the (new) layout we have. And we've brought in some new equipment," he said. "Technology is the key to our success."

Fox Valley Spring once had a stock catalog program, but eventually got away from it. Everything they manufacture now is custom-made.

"Anything made of steel spring is what we supply to our customers," explained Stang. "Early on in my business my thought was: 'Just supply springs and wireforms.' But some of our key customers said: 'If you're not going to supply other flat steel parts and other spring steel parts then you're not going to supply us with springs.' That ultimately led us to supply anything made of spring steel."

The company has a diverse customer base from various industries and they specialize in compression springs, extension springs, torsion spring, flat springs, wire forms, die springs and sub-assemblies.

"If we can't do it ourselves, we'll partner with another spring company," explained Klein. "We try to offer the one-stop shop."

### Toward a Bright Future

Regarding the future, Stang has not ruled out expanding to other parts of the U.S., such as the southwest or southeast areas. "Whether it's another plant I don't know," commented Stang. "But I feel we need to do something about those locations."

He's said the road ahead for Fox Valley Spring is very bright.

"You know, we got through the economic times over the last few years and expanded," he said. "We're adding a building and we're adding customers; we're doing a lot of good things."

### Putting a Spring in Employees' Step

The company earned the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce and Industry's 2009 Small Manufacturer of the Year award. The annual award recognizes outstanding manufacturers based on size.

In a story about the award published in the *Appleton Post-Crescent* newspaper, Fox Valley Spring's vice president of operations, Keith Wincentsen, cited the company's high employee retention rate as one of the reasons for success along with their use of Lean Manufacturing.

He said employees and customers alike have noticed the award and what it recognizes.

"For employees of the company, the award is an affirmation that what they are doing is making a



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difference,” said Wincentsen. “It puts a spring in their step.”

For customers of the company, the award is an affirmation that the supplier they chose is “everything that we say we are,” explained Wincentsen.

While already having a number of good employees with longevity, Stang says finding good people has been difficult for Fox Valley Spring. “We are not only looking for people with a lot of knowledge, we are looking for people who can learn. And that’s a big key to our success – our employees. Employees can make or break a business.”

He said it comes down to hiring good people who will work hard.

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### Spring Industry Lessons

In regards to lessons learned in the spring industry, Stang says one key is: “Don’t always trust professionals. Don’t assume they always know what they’re talking about. Trust your feelings and your common sense, because they are usually more accurate,” he says.

The other key Stang has learned is in hiring people. He says when you think you’ve hired the absolute perfect person, they may not turn out to be. Conversely, he said the person who doesn’t appear to know much can sometimes “run circles” around everyone else.

For Klein, one key lesson he’s learned is that when it comes to customers, never take anything for granted. “You have to constantly stay in touch with customers and make them feel good about what you’re doing.”

He concludes, “I’ve learned over the past 20 years with customers to ‘never assume.’ When you take things for granted that’s usually when it backfires on you.”

### Home Grown Success

Stang proudly points to Wincentsen as a model of employee success and advancement at Fox Valley Spring. Wincentsen started with the company 16 years ago, after fulfilling his military service duties. While he was going to school to learn, he began working at Fox Valley Spring part-time in the shop.

“He started out doing the lowest job we had and he was very good at it,” remembers Stang. “So we moved him up to the next level.”

Stang said that every time he moved Wincentsen, he excelled at his new position. “It’s kind of a neat



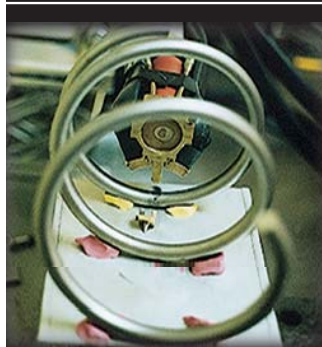
Fox Valley Spring employees celebrate the groundbreaking for the company's new and expanded facility in Greenville, Wis.

story to see somebody start out part-time and become a critical part of your organization.”

Family is an integral part of Fox Valley Spring’s operations. Stang’s son, Russ Jr., has worked for the company for 20 years and is a quality inspector that is being moved to a designer position and to become more involved in running the company.

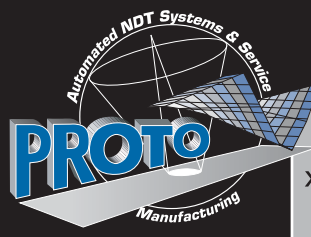
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Stang's daughter, Jennifer, has worked 10 years for the company and she is moving toward becoming Fox Valley Springs' director of purchasing.

Klein has two family members who work for the company and call him "boss." His brother, Bob, has worked for the company six years and is the direct salesman for Wisconsin, while his son, Dan, is a direct salesman for Illinois and has worked at Fox Valley Spring for one year.

"Right after Charly started," related Stang, "I saw what he was capable of and I said, 'Do you have any family in mind to help us?'"

Klein says he's been able to keep business and family separate. "Bob and I worked together in a previous life and we managed to make it work. When we get together, we don't talk shop. We leave that for during the day."

### Costume Fun at Halloween

One of the unusual things Stang does each year is hold a costume contest for employees during Halloween. About two-thirds of the staff dress-up to vie for first, second and third prize money.

"Some people think that's a little weird," admitted Stang. "But I think they (employees) enjoy it and have fun with it."

Stang said one employee actually brought in a donkey with a sombrero to complement her costume as Don Quixote.

Klein has been part of the costume contest, most recently as Frankenstein. He explained that when the company was nominated for the Fox Cities Manufacturer of the Year award that some of the judges visited the plant during the contest. "I think it helped us win because they saw the fun that we have as a company."

In addition, he said a potential new customer also came to visit during the contest. Klein said when they went back to the prospect to follow-up on the visit, the customer said: "I was really impressed with Captain Morgan." That comment was in reference to the company's engineer, who dressed up in that role.

The customer remarked to Klein: "When I saw that, I knew I wanted to do business with you guys."

### Keeping up with Customers

Stang firmly believes that customer expectations have risen during the 22 years he's headed up Fox Valley Spring.

"If quality wasn't a given before, it is now," said Stang.

"I think truly the expectation is a better price, faster, better customer service and making it easier for them," he explained, "which are all things we're pretty good at."

Klein adds: "We try to make it easy for the buyers, so they can focus on the bigger ticket items."

When asked for "words of wisdom" for the next generation of springmakers, Stang said his advice applies to both to the current and to future generations.

"Work hard, work smart. There's a difference," he explains. "Technology is your friend. Treat your employees and customers like you would like to be treated."

Stang concludes, "I think that has worked for us." ♦



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