

THE BUSINESS NEWS

Serving Brown, Calumet, Door, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano & Winnebago counties

May 22, 2006

www.thebusinessnewsonline.com

Vol. 4, No 2 \$1.00

In charge in man's world



Carmen Fosick became general manager and co-owner of Elmstar Electric in Kaukauna after her father, Gus Fosick, founder of the company, turned operation of the company over to her and her two brothers. The Business News photo by Kristin Stankewicz

Daughter runs business operations for her father's electrical contracting business

By Kristin Stankewicz

kstankewicz@thebusinessnewsonline.com

You're a young woman in a male-dominated industry, you're at the helm of your father's business, and you're faced with cutting jobs to ensure the company's future.

That's the unenviable situation Carmen Fosick, general manager and co-owner of Elmstar Electric in Kaukauna, found herself in last year.

"We had to restructure," said Fosick, whose father, Gus Fosick, founded Elmstar Electric in 1979.

The changes weren't easy, but the results have been positive. "Right-sizing has made things more efficient," she said.

Elmstar Electric specializes in three areas: municipal projects such as traffic signals and parking-lot lights; commercial, industrial and institutional projects; and data communication services.

Data communication is the most recent addition, including telephone and data cabling and equipment, phone systems, fire alarm systems and security systems.

The expansion into data communication is part of Fosick's plan to position Elmstar Electric at the top of an extremely competitive industry.

"Many electrical contractors just subcontract that kind of work," she said. By performing the work in-house, Elmstar has more control, but also more responsibility.

"We can't blame other vendors if something goes wrong; we have no excuses," said Fosick.

Growing up, Fosick spent Saturdays and summer vacations at Elmstar with her father. She learned the business from the ground up: from cleaning to secretarial work to estimating.

After graduating from St. Norbert College in 1997, she was weighing her career options when her father asked her to join the family business.

"I went to college to be an actuary," she said. "I was a math person, and I never equated that to business. But when he asked me, I knew right away that's what I wanted to do."

Now co-owner of Elmstar with her brothers Ron and Clint, who work in the field, Fosick said she didn't have a difficult transition when she joined the company full time.

"I did get some comments about having to 'prove myself' when I came on board," she said. "But that's never been my concern. I do what it takes to get the job done."

Soon after she joined the company, Fosick partnered with a business consultant who helped her examine Elmstar's processes.

"We came up with easier, better ways to do

things," she said.

Fosick's father, Gus, has turned operations of the company over to his children, but is still involved with the business.

"He leaves the decisions up to me. He's more of a technical consultant; he knows that side of the business, and I know the other part. He's handy to have around," she said, smiling.

Being a woman in the male-dominated electrical contracting world doesn't phase Fosick. It's never been an issue with her clients, she said. "I'm the only girl; I'm outnumbered. But I do what I need to do."

Changes in the electrical contracting industry after Sept. 11, 2001, forced Elmstar to reexamine its business model. Many of the large municipal and state jobs the company historically bid on dried up.

In order to stay competitive, Fosick again focused on processes and efficiency.

The 2005 restructuring was difficult, because many employees had been with Elmstar for a decade or longer. Fosick made the tough decisions: some workers were cut, and others saw changes to their jobs.

"You used to come in as a kid, and now you're telling them what to do. No one likes to change. But what I was doing was necessary," she said.

Still, "There were hurt feelings."

When the changes were announced, rumors started that Elmstar was closing down. Customers called Fosick, alarmed.

"The first call shocked me," she said. "I just explained to them that we were restructuring to be more efficient."

But more calls followed.

"I even had someone from the State of Wisconsin call and say he heard I was shutting my doors. I just had to keep telling people 'no, we're not closing,'" she said.

As part of the restructuring, Fosick changed Elmstar's focus from hard bid jobs, in which a contractor performs the work and moves on to the next job, to a service and maintenance model.

"We're still bidding state projects, and getting them," she said. "But we also want to develop relationships."

Fosick wants to build on Elmstar's reputation of providing quality workmanship and superior customer service. It's not about turning in the lowest bid, she said.

"When you pay bottom dollar, that's what you get," she said. "We get called in to clean up messes left behind by other contractors — cables all over, phone jacks mixed up. We don't do that to customers. We do every job as though we're the ones who are going to be maintaining it for life."