

'First-class operation'



Matthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal

John Conway, owner of Conway Services, inspects a heating and cooling unit installed by one of his crews in a new house.

Quality work helps heating/air company grow

By MARK WATSON / watson@commercialappeal.com

WHEN JOHN CONWAY CAME TO WORK for his father at Conway Services in 1994, the business had one truck, two employees and annual sales of \$250,000.

Today, the heating and air-conditioning service company's 45 employees operate 20 trucks, generating sales of \$500,000 to \$600,000 a month.

How that change came about could serve as a case study in how to succeed in business.

Conway, who bought the business from his father, Raymond Conway Sr., in 1998, attributes the company's success to sticking to its word.

"In this day and age when homeowners are frustrated with people not doing what they say they're going to do, I think the majority of our success is just doing what we say we're going to do," said Conway, 34.

That certainly was a factor in Arlene LoBianco's experience with the company.

In July, the air-conditioning in her Millington house stopped working the day before the warranty expired and shortly before overnight visitors were due. Conway fixed it about an hour before the company arrived.

"They just bent over backward to give good service," LoBianco said. "A lot of times, when it's under warranty, you can't get them back out to do anything real soon."

But meeting customer expectations is just where Conway starts. He regularly innovates to differentiate his business from competitors.

For example, his technicians don shoe covers before entering a customer's house to keep from tracking dirt inside. If they must spend much time in the house, they lay a red carpet and other floor covering to protect the area from grease and dirt.

Cordova homeowner Carlton Bagwell said Conway technicians covered about 20 square feet of space in the house to protect it when they repaired a system this past summer.

"I had never seen anybody do that before," he

said.

Sitting in the Conway Services office at 6426 Summer Gale, where it relocated a year ago this month, Conway said, "We are looking for more cutting-edge methods."

To that end, the company belongs to Nexstar, a group of 300 heating and air-conditioning companies that share ideas to improve service.

A person from the main office calls the customer a half-hour before the technician arrives to let the customer know he is on the way. After the service call is finished, another person from the main office calls to make sure the customer is satisfied. Conway employs an outside service to survey customer satisfaction.

"We will sacrifice profits," Conway said. "We will sacrifice man-hours. We will sacrifice whatever we need to make the customer happy."

Jim Long, who lives in the Bartlett area, testifies to that. Long hired Conway Services to replace his home air-conditioning system in the summer of 2003. This past summer, part of the system failed while the Longs were out of town, and when they returned, water had leaked into a closet.

"We called, they had somebody back out to fix it, and the following day, they sent a contractor out to repair the closet," Long said. "We'd never been treated that well by anybody on a service call. He stood behind the product and behind the labor. ... They run a first-class operation."

CONWAY SERVICES

■ **Head person:** John Conway

■ **Address:** 6426 Summer Gale

■ **Sales:** \$5.2 million in 2004

■ **Number of employees:** 45

■ **Phone number:** 384-3511

Company trucks have a speed governor so that if any truck exceeds 65 miles per hour, Conway gets an E-mail about the time and place of the speeding. The trucks — cleaned by a professional detailing service on Wednesdays — also have geographic positioning systems, so the staff knows where the truck is at any time of day.

"We say that we don't sell heating and air-conditioning equipment," Conway said. "We're selling equipment."

The business services York, Trane and Carrier climate control systems.

Conway plans for his company to achieve sales of \$10 million a year by 2008. The company had \$4 million in sales in 2003 and about \$5.2 million in 2004, and he has budgeted for sales of \$6.8 million in 2005.

"A lot of that is contingent on making sure we have the best people in place," he said.

Conway's biggest challenge is recruiting the best workers. Therefore, the company does it year-round, while others often emphasize hiring during their busy seasons.

"We really look at a technician closely and decide if he can fit in with our code of ethics and if he can perform the best work in the city," Conway said. "Our company changes all the time. We do personality profiles on employees when they're hired. If their personality is not conducive to change, they're not going to do well."

The company hires technicians from other firms and trains technicians regularly, sending them to classes around the nation. They are not paid a commission on part sales.

"If you pay a technician a commission on part sales, you've just encouraged that technician to sell a customer a part he or she may not need," Conway said. "We don't want to do that."

The company has a program in which the individual who scores highest on certain activities, such as enrolling customers on a regular maintenance contract, gets a \$200 gift card.

"Our employees have to buy into this philosophy," Conway said. "If nobody buys in, it's not going to work."