



Summit Contractors Group

After significant growth, this contractor is refocusing and fine-tuning the processes that have already won it such acclaim. Marc Padgett explains.

Experience in Success

There are many contractors who enjoyed the housing bubble that are hurting today, but Summit Contractors, one of the largest and most successful in the country, has yet to falter.

"We were lucky to have won a large number of contracts before the bubble burst. Those will carry us through these tough times, and we are proud of our reputation for excellent work that keeps customers coming back," said Marc Padgett, executive vice president.

He reported that as much as 70% of Summit's business comes from repeat customers, an encouraging statistic when contracts are so few. Padgett attributes such success to the comprehensive customer management system the company developed. It includes a full-time superintendent for each project, weekly meetings with field personnel, and monthly reports for owners.

Summit takes safety and quality to a new level, however, through its unique focus on waterproofing and attention to threats of mold or mildew. Padgett explained that Summit teams hold specific waterproofing meetings during the early framing stages, and all subcontractors with any role in the exterior of the building are required to attend.

Since Summit builds a great deal of multi-family housing projects made with wood frames, mold and mildew can be huge problems but are largely preventable. Construction teams apply an inhibitive solution before installing insulation or drywall. The installation team takes air samples afterwards to guarantee that there is no mold or mildew when the team turns the project over.

Climbing high

That kind of attention to detail hasn't gone unnoticed. Between 2002 and 2004, Summit was recognized for excellence in quality and safety seven times. In 2004, *Builder* magazine named Summit the number one multi-family builder in the country, and in the same year, *Engineer News* ranked the company 151 out of 400 top US contractors.



That dedication also explains why Summit has completed more than 200 multi-family housing projects, totaling to more than 60,000 separate units, across the US. Those figures do not include the work other branches of Summit do on retail, hotel, commercial, mixed-use, or tax-credit housing projects, which adds up to roughly 8 million square feet.

Historically, Summit focused on commercial building in the Southeast, such as the *St. Augustine Records* newspaper facility in St. Augustine, Fla. and the General Motors facility in Jacksonville. "We work on so many kinds of projects mostly because we've always followed our customers and worked with them on whatever they needed," Padgett explained.

Refocusing

After 2005, however, Padgett said the company decided to scale back its reach. "We were making a name for ourselves, aggressively pursuing contracts and getting business from all over the country," he said. "But we quickly realized that it was less important to be the biggest contractor in the US than it was to be the best, and our size was beginning to impact the attention to detail that the executives in our company were able to give to our clients."

In just two years, Summit grew from \$160 million in volume to more than \$300 million, with 50 projects going simultaneously from coast to coast as the company entered 2005. At

the height of the housing bubble, the company was moving into regions it had never worked in before and partnering with companies with whom it had no prior experience.

“Summit has always been a very relationship-driven company, and our size had begun to dilute longstanding, positive relationships with some of our clients,” Padgett said.

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The company repositioned itself to build almost exclusively multi-family housing projects in the Southeast and hasn't looked back. Such a focused business plan has been an asset in these tough times, according to Padgett. Today, Summit takes on roughly 15 projects at one time. And by focusing only on projects in the Southeast and a few in the Midwest, all the activity stays close to the company's headquarters in Jacksonville.

That limit has also enabled the company to refocus on its employees. The need to communicate effectively



is one lesson Summit has retained from its significant growth. “Some contractors forget that a project team is more than just their own people, but also the owner, the architect, the local municipal departments, and more. By bringing all those people together, we can work more effectively,” said Padgett.

He added that weekly meetings and monthly reports are only the tip of iceberg as far as communication surrounding any project goes. “The sooner we begin regular scheduled communications, the smoother our projects run,” he said, adding that communication helps Summit avoid costly delays once a project begins by keeping everyone informed about any unexpected problems.

“We learned a valuable lesson after growing so much in such a short span. We realized it was our attention to detail, our open communication, and our people that had brought us such success, and no amount of fame would replace those assets,” Padgett concluded. ■

—Meghan Flynn



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