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Treat them right

By focusing on service, Superior Termite & Pest Management plans to have customers for life.

BY **JOHN WALSH** | Contributing Editor

Mike Wilcox and his family are crystal clear about one thing when it comes to their business: It's paramount they treat their customers right. In doing so, they plan to have many of them for life.

Wilcox owns Pensacola, Fla.-based Superior Termite & Pest Management, which he founded in 1999. His son, Chris Rawson, is COO, and his wife, Angie Wilcox, is president. Their mission is to provide affordable termite and pest control services with superior customer service.

"We provide this superior service by focusing on each customer experience and need, ensuring each treatment is tailored to meet the needs of that family and home," Wilcox says. "We value everything it takes to create a superior customer experience: honesty, integrity, respect, courtesy and punctuality."

IT STARTED IN THE GARAGE

Wilcox began his pest management career nearly 25 years ago with Sears Termite & Pest Control (aka All America Termite & Pest Control) as an inexperienced technician. He moved quickly through the ranks



Superior's Mike Wilcox, Angie Wilcox and Chris Rawson.

into management, leading the Pensacola office to No. 1 within the company. Promoted to regional manager, he moved to Arizona to help develop operations out West. After a few years, Wilcox brought his family back to his roots on the Gulf Coast. After working for a short time with a local company, he and his wife decided to take a leap of faith and start their own.

"The customer service at the company I was working for wasn't at a level I thought it needed to be," Mike Wilcox says. "I thought Angie and I could do it better."

"Like every company, we started from nothing," Angie Wilcox says. "We wanted to open a company based on the Christian values of honesty and integrity, and provide good value to our customers. I was working my job as a dental hygienist during the day and learning the pest control industry at night. We started the company in the back of our garage with four children at home."

"I can remember waking up in the morning and finding my mom asleep at our little computer desk in the corner of our garage," Rawson says.

Superior, which has 19 employees and annual revenue of more than \$1.5 million, has yet to advertise. Business is generated via word of mouth and reputation. The company is lean for the volume of work it does so it can pay employees — who stay with the company — well, Rawson says.

"We use technology to stay lean, which allows us to keep our family feel," he says. "It also lets us be more competitive with pay."



Chris Rawson
inspects plumbing
access points.

TREATING FOR TERMITES

The company is focused on termites and general household pests.

"We stopped at that until this year, when we'll do residential mosquito control," Rawson says. "We want to be experts on the pests we control. For example, Mike is an expert on wood-destroying organisms (WDO)."

Of Superior's entire business, 60 percent is in the termite segment and 99 percent is residential. Mike Wilcox's solid relationships with real-estate boards feed the termite side.

"We have a high renewal rate and many long-standing customers," he says.

Wilcox applies an old-school philosophy to treating homes for termites.

"Companies have gotten away from inspecting and treating all entry points of houses to save money," he says. "In doing so, a company will make \$2 million more a year because it's not applying as much product and saving on labor. But I'm not going to play Russian roulette with people's houses. Our customers trust us to keep termites out of their homes.

"A lot of technicians don't have drills anymore, and some young technicians don't even know about drills," he adds. "Companies want to save money on labor, equipment and product, but we don't take shortcuts at the customer's expense. We also educate customers about different programs. We're not doing anything special; we're using the best products on the market and treating homes following the full treatment label."

Wilcox cites a story about a house inspection to make his point clear. He pulled into the driveway of a home when a technician from another company was pulling out. The technician from the other company was there because the homeowner had a warranty. Wilcox was there because the house was for sale and a real-estate company requested his services for a WDO inspection. He went into the garage, which contained tables and furniture, and noticed it looked like the homeowner was ready for a yard sale.

"I'm standing there, and I look at the corner of the garage and notice something that looked like termite damage, so I went over, popped off a baseboard and saw termites behind it," he says. The other company had not taken that extra step of moving furniture aside to take a look.

Wilcox takes customer satisfaction a step further and says Superior will even take a hit on the chin to retain long-term customers.

"Our approach is to address every entry point," he says. "We won't do auto renewals; we'll do an inspection before we collect money for a renewal."

Superior's technicians are trained not only to look for termites, but to identify any contributing factors that might make a home or property conducive or vulnerable to termite entry. They look for these factors before they make an initial treatment, and during the annual inspection and renewal process. A technician then reports any conducive conditions to the customer so problems can be addressed or fixed. Wilcox prides his company on these thorough, annual inspections, which are conducted outside and in. But he says not all companies inspect this way.

"Some companies offer a 10- to 15-percent discount if they don't have to come out and do an inspection," he says. "But you have to pry and poke. You have to be a little invasive. We won't do an inspection unless we have access inside and outside the home. It's a little difference in philosophy.

"At the same time," he adds, "your customers have to want your help. We need to educate customers much more than just selling them a termite job. It's all about how we can help customers."

Superior puts a priority on customer education, especially for those who move to Florida from others parts of the country and aren't familiar with termites and the severe damage they can cause.

"Termites do more damage to homes in Florida than fires and natural disasters combined," Wilcox says. "It's just something you do; you protect your house from termite pressure. We do everything

in our power to take care of our customers. We take care of our customers if they have damage. We do that, and they're customers for life."

The final, yet important component of that care, Wilcox says, is having a warranty that's easy to read.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

For the past 13 years, the office has been fully web-based and integrated to improve workflow and manage customers. But Rawson admits the company



This garage header beam has such an active termite infestation that a pen easily slips through.

"We need to educate customers much more than just selling them a termite job."



Superior's tips from the trenches

MARKETING

- Focus on customers. Multiple-service homes are key. Many times technicians get used to seeing these customers as termite-only, for example, and forget to discuss other services with them.
- A company's online presence needs to be strong. Ads are great, but growing your presence organically is more important.
- Spend some money on community organizations, such as athletic clubs, high schools and youth team sports.

NETWORKING

- Networking should be a topic with all employees, who should be encouraged to talk to everyone when they're out and about. Also encourage them to become involved in the community as a representative of the company.
- Join — and be active in — the local chamber of commerce.
- Realtors are your best friends.

TECHNICAL TIPS

- Inspect the problem areas thoroughly to determine mode of entry, so the correct treatment strategy can be selected to treat effected areas.
- All equipment should be well maintained and in good operating condition, so chemicals can be correctly applied according to the label at all times.
- Thorough annual inspections must be done as part of the renewal of the warranty.

SAVING TIME

- Do it right the first time. Focus on quality, not quantity, and you won't have to return until next year.
- Use software to optimize technicians' routes.
- Inspecting equipment monthly will help ensure technicians don't have problems while on a job.
- Saving time doesn't always mean finishing fast.

—Chris Rawson

Rawson's technology-focused role has allowed his parents to move the company forward, as opposed to just getting by every day. And thanks to Rawson, Superior now has an advertising budget.

"It's small, but we have one," he says. "Advertising will open doors that didn't exist for us before.

"I'm excited to hire more local people and have an impact on the lives of our employees and customers," he adds. "If we treat employees right, they'll treat the customers right."

That philosophy is proving effective: Superior's retention rate on termite renewals is more than 90 percent. PMP

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hadn't been taking full advantage of its industry software technology until recently because of how much the company is growing. Adding to its one small office, the company will be building a new one, which means it has a lot of ground to cover serving Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, as well as the greater Crestview area.

After working as project manager for a software company, Rawson returned to the family business in April to help analyze and grow it. His mission has been to update the company's brand, improve its online presence, and implement and integrate software to optimize its operations and improve customer service.

Superior's online presence has improved during the past six months as a result of working with web designers to build an attractive website that's optimized for search engines. It even allows Realtors to order their WDO inspections online.

By using technology such as tablets and up-to-date software, Rawson has modified the company's operations so it's not using as much paper. With all of the technology implementations and upgrades, he estimates the company has saved close to \$500 a month as a result of all its efficiencies — not including gas savings, wear and tear on trucks, and the hours of productivity improvements.

For example, technicians don't have to return to the office during the day; they can be out in the field with customers. By implementing technology, Wilcox can focus more on training technicians two hours a day, instead of having to catch up when he returns to the office. He has access to everything in the office in his truck, and can handle calls and employee questions in between his normal appointments. Wilcox also spends one day every other month teaching WDO basics at the Pensacola Association of Realtors.