

Safe-Way Garage Doors acquires 1st United Door Technologies

Exclusive interview with Safe-Way CEO Ted Rock

By Vicki Jones, Editor

1st United Door Technologies is an Arizona-based manufacturer of residential and commercial sectional steel and wood doors with over 150 years of combined door and installation experience. On Sept. 6, 1st United was acquired by Safe-Way Garage Doors, a portfolio company of CW Industrial Partners and leading manufacturer and distributor of residential, commercial, and industrial overhead garage doors, headquartered in Warsaw, Ind.

To learn more about the acquisition and how it will benefit door dealers, we talked with Ted Rock, CEO of Safe-Way Garage Doors, in a one-on-one interview.

How did the acquisition come about?

Safe-Way Garage Doors (SWD) is currently experiencing great success, but we came to the strategic realization that our existing manufacturing and distribution footprint did not have the national geographical reach we wanted. To better achieve our goals of expanding our product offering and generating revenue growth, a strategic acquisition made sense.

The first part of our acquisition strategy was determining what company we needed to partner with. We knew we were interested in a manufacturer with great people, great service, and great products.

Why 1st United Door Technologies (1st United)?

There was a short list of companies we talked with, but we ultimately chose to partner with 1st United for three important reasons:

1. The people — 1st United has tremendously talented people who not only have years of experience in the industry but also share our values and customer-centric philosophy. Both 1st United Door and SWD believe that people drive our businesses.
2. The geographic reach — The locations of the 1st United manufacturing and distribution facilities are ideal for our expansion goals and allow us to create a multi-site footprint.
3. The products — With 1st United, we can offer a deeper, wider, and more diverse range of products. We now have a broader range of product designs and more technical service people to support those products. We can also service our customers faster and work through door design solutions quicker.

What motivated the decision to expand?

The acquisition was built on scale, growth, and revenue enhancement; it was not built on the back of cost savings. The newly combined entity is committed to a great future for every one of our employees. We expect to have better leverage, better buying powers, and potential for supply chain synergies.

What additional growth opportunities does the acquisition offer SWD?

With the acquisition, we now have eight distribution facilities and two manufacturing

facilities — one in Tempe, Ariz., and one in Warsaw, Ind.

Additionally, we have existing geographies within the current service system that have the potential for a larger presence, as well as new geographies that can offer new presence and opportunities.

You are relatively new to the garage door industry. Can you tell us more about your background?

Since December 2021, I have been the CEO of SWD. Prior to SWD, I worked for private equity-owned manufacturing companies for 19 years and spent the last 12 years in the building product sector.

My building products background has been in the window and entry door space, focusing on creating scale, enhancing performance (revenue, process development, financial, cost management), strategically determining valuable partnerships, and generating revenue growth.

When we bought SWD in 2021, we knew it had a powerful presence in the garage door sector. We wanted to create a platform for our dealers with geographical reach, and at the same time we did not want to compromise on product quality. Our goal was to continue to manufacture high-quality, safe, and reliable doors while continuing to reinforce the culture of treating our dealers as long-term partners in success.



What has surprised you most about the industry so far?

I've learned that garage door design is far more sophisticated than I gave it credit for. The performance expectations, the engineering, the quality, and the safety requirements far exceeded what I previously knew about garage doors. I have tremendous respect for the complexity required to give a garage door owner the peace of mind that a quality garage door provides.

Also, I've learned that the future of the garage door sector is promising. There are many opportunities for remodel market potential and product expansion, which makes it an ideal time to be in this sector.

Will 1st United maintain its existing name/brand?

One of the most common mistakes that companies make following an acquisition is thinking that they need to rush to establish a "main" or "parent" brand with "sub-brands." Many times, no one recognizes the parent company name, and the established branding of the sub-brands is undervalued. We plan on establishing brand awareness and equity that exceeds our customers' expectations and provides the value they deserve.

We're trying to create a brand strategy that's logical. For example, Pepsi is the parent company of many well-established sub-brands like Gatorade. 1st United and SWD are both well-established companies, and we believe

in both storied brands and their brand equity. We want to be the Pepsi of the garage door industry. We recognize that bringing these companies together will take time, and we will do our best to get it right.

John Jella has been described as one of the last true manufacturing entrepreneurs in the garage door industry. What will his role be following the acquisition?

John Jella and his partners started 1st United in 1999 after selling Anozira Door Systems. I have a tremendous amount of respect for John as a person, as a business entrepreneur, and as a product designer.

John and Jeff Jella, as well as Don Bratton and Mike Shackelford, were significantly involved with the acquisition. Going forward, John and Jeff will transition out of the day-to-day operations and will not have an active role, but they will remain as advisors for the company.

We are looking forward to having them involved in an advisory capacity for product design and product research. Bratton and Shackelford remain involved in the daily operations of the company.

Will the acquisition spark any new products for SWD?

The joining of these two companies offers great potential for product development. We very much envision an expansion of our product offerings in the future. We believe we have several options available to us because of

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the additional experience that we gain from this acquisition.

1st United is good at many things. Their customer-centric approach and manufacturing may be among their greatest achievements. The acquisition exemplifies SWD's continued effort to bring smart, talented people together. That includes great engineering talent, sales talent, and manufacturing talent.

Why should SWD dealers be excited about this purchase?

Together, we are faster and smarter, and have the ability to offer more products than ever before. We exponentially increased our garage door industry experience by bringing these two manufacturing companies together. It also allows us to create new pathways for distribution, expand our products in technical and design features, develop more promotional strategies, and increase overall options for our dealers.

Additionally, one of the things that resonated with us is that 1st United has an amazing can-do attitude. If there's a problem, then they go and solve it. SWD shares that mindset. We may not be the biggest manufacturer in the market, but we have smart people, and our customer-centric philosophy undoubtedly gives us an advantage.

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FROM THE PAGES OF HISTORY

Safe-Way Garage Doors

- 1959** Safe-Way Garage Doors (SWD) is founded in Ohio and moves to Warsaw, Ind., in the early 1960s.

- 1983** A new 65,000-sq.-ft. Warsaw facility is built.

- 1986** The company expands its product line to include industrial steel doors.

- 1987** SWD adds its first distribution center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

- 1990s** Manufacturing capabilities are expanded; the company adds Regency Series doors, featuring steel two-sided construction with a polystyrene core.

- 2002** The company opens a distribution center in Nixa, Mo.

- 2004** SWD is acquired by Equity Capital Partners LLC in April, enabling further growth and development.

- 2016** The company launches Ambient Series doors, featuring two-sided steel construction with polyurethane insulation.

- 2018** New colors are introduced for selected series, including Driftwood for Deluxe models and Black and Grey for the Ambient and Regency Series.

- 2019** SWD announces a rebranding of its iconic logo to celebrate its 60th year in business. The main logo is updated with a design focused on the company's commitment to providing quality products for the residential and commercial door markets.

- 2021** Capital Works Industrial Partners, partnered with CEO Ted Rock, acquires Safe-Way Garage Doors.

- 2022** SWD focuses its efforts into the steel garage door markets and ceases production of wood doors.

- 2023** SWD acquires 1st United Door Technologies in Tempe, Ariz., from John Jella, Jeff Jella, Don Bratton, and Michael Shackleford.

