

AMERICA'S LARGEST FEMALE-RUN DOOR DEALERSHIP?





THE FAMILY: From left: Ralph Nordick (TCGD founder), Lisa Donabauer (his daughter), Brett Nordick (his son)

Retiring president shares secrets and advice

Editor's note: For several years, Twin City Garage Door of the Minneapolis area has been on our radar screen as one of the top-performing garage door dealerships in the nation. It has also had the distinction of being perhaps America's largest door dealership run by a woman.

When we learned that its longtime president, Lisa Donabauer, was retiring at the end of June 2016, we decided it was time to visit her and learn about TCGD's story and its secrets.

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND

Can you give me a quick summary of how Twin City Garage Door was established?

It was founded by Ralph B. Nordick (my dad) and Robert J. Palumbo in 1965 when they bought the commercial door department of their employer, Johnson-Newman Co. They were initially a franchise of Overhead Door, but only for a short time. My dad was the installation manager, and Bob did the sales.

When and how did you start working in the business?

I started in 1984, 32 years ago. My husband had developed schizophrenia, so we had just moved back to Minnesota from San Diego to be closer to our families, and I needed a job. I had a master's degree in special education, and I did some substitute teaching, but that wasn't where I wanted to be.

So I asked my dad if he needed anyone at the shop, and he said he didn't know. He had already moved up north and started Midland Garage Door. He still owned TCGD, but he was not present. He told me to go talk to his GM.

I then asked the GM if he needed an administrative assistant. He said he did not, but that he'd always wanted to open a branch office. So he told me that he'd hire me to do that and "see if you have any of your dad in you."

So, you asked about a secretarial job, and they hired you to start a branch operation?

Yep. That was intimidating; I remember the feeling of fright I got. But it was also exciting. Three months after I started, I opened our first branch office in Burnsville. I didn't know much then, but I learned real quickly. It was sink or swim.

I ran that office for just over 10 years until my dad sold TCGD to the APi Group in 1995. I was then brought back to the main TCGD office here in New Hope.

Tell me a little about your dad, Ralph B. Nordick.

My dad is a self-made man. After high school, he did two years of Army and two years of carpentry training at Dunwoody Technical Institute in Minneapolis. You've got to admire guys like that ... nothing but guts and loads of common sense.

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I've heard you and others talk about RBNisms, the sayings of your father. It's clear to me that his imprint is still firmly implanted on TCGD. Can you name three ways that Ralph's way of doing business is still a strong part of the company?

Many RBNisms still resonate in our company. That's remarkable when you recall that it's been 21 years since he left TCGD! Three of his principles that still lead this company are: watch the small stuff, pay attention to your people, and make common sense decisions.

So, did you become president of TCGD in 1995?

Yes. When my dad sold TCGD to APi Group, they made me the president. They took me out to dinner and made a big deal out of it. They have always been very good to me.

What percentage of your employees have been with you for 10 years or more?

Out of our 75 employees, 35 have been here 10 years or longer. That's 47 percent!

It's remarkable that your attrition is so low. Why do you think you retain employees so well?

We have fun! We try to treat our employees well. Another RBNism is "We're loyal to them that's loyal to us."

You might be the largest female-run door dealership in the country. In what way is it easier for a woman to run a door business?

I don't think it is easier for a woman at all. But in general terms, it is often true that women have better organizational and communication skills than men. Does that count?

Sure, it counts. In what way is it harder for a woman?

As a woman in a man's industry, you are not taken seriously until you prove that you *more than know* your stuff and that you can take care of your customers' garage door needs as well as a man can.

I have often had gruff male customers ask to speak to the "man in the back." I tell them, "There is no man in the back. I am the woman who runs the crew and the office, and you can ask me whatever you want."

ABOUT THE BUSINESS

Let's talk about the business. How many company vehicles do you have?

We have 32 company trucks, and the residential installers use their personal trucks, for which we compensate them.

You compensate installers for using their own trucks? Why do you do that?

I hate to answer this way, but the truth is, this is how we have always done it.

What were your annual sales in 2015?

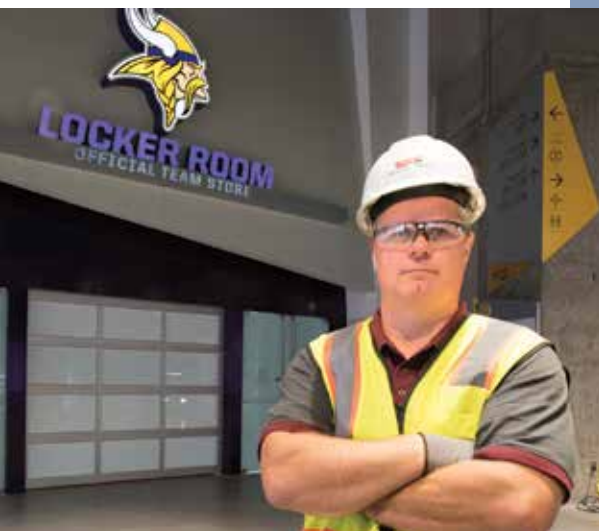
Just north of \$20 million. That was helped by a huge 1.2-million-dollar contract we just finished for the new Minnesota Vikings stadium. I believe it's one of the largest contracts ever won by a door company in this state, maybe beyond. It's certainly the biggest job in our company's history.

What were your annual sales back in 1995 when you took over?

It was closer to \$5 million, maybe as much as \$7-8 million. We were stuck in the \$10 million zone for quite a while. I recall one board meeting when our owner said he had a dream that TCGD broke \$11 million. Perhaps that comment shamed me into breaking us out of that rut.

It's a remarkable feat to triple your sales in 20 years, especially with a difficult recession in there. What might be the top three factors that led to such growth?

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MILLION-DOLLAR JOB: Dave Saffrin at US Bank Stadium, the new stadium for the Minnesota Vikings.

TCGD and the new Minnesota Vikings stadium



Time to develop bid	1 year
Time to complete the project	1 year
Sectional doors	40
Rolling counter doors	77
High performance doors	2
Rolling doors	51
Total doors	170
Total cost of stadium	\$1.1 billion
Total bid for doors	\$1.2 million
Completion date	May 2016
Point of pride	Not one door was delivered late
Reasons TCGD won the bid	"We were the most cooperative, we gave the best plan for execution, and the price was right." — Dave Saffrin, TCGD senior project manager

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ALWAYS AT YOUR COMMAND



THE TEAM: Most of TCGD's employees at New Hope, one of its four locations.

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We merged with The Garage Door Store, and that contributed about \$7 million to that 2016 total. Part of our growth is due to the popularity of specialty doors on both the residential and commercial ends. Those items boost the sales volume in a hurry.

Besides that, we have a great sales force and field crew and a high level of trust from our customers.

What percentage of your business is residential, and what percentage is commercial?

So far this year, it's 26 percent residential and 74 percent commercial.

What percentage of your commercial business is rolling doors?

About 30 percent is rolling doors, 10 percent is specialty and high-speed doors, and 60 percent is sectional.

Why does TCGD do so well at commercial work?

We have an excellent reputation with the general contractors. That equates to more opportunities to bid and more partnering on design-build projects. If a contractor has a particularly difficult project or one with a tight timeline, they know they can count on us.

You sell so many different residential and commercial products. Which one stands out as a product category that you would highly recommend to other door dealers?

Garage door screens. That market is booming, especially on the residential side.

I'm impressed that you make your own strip doors and loops (for loop detectors) and assemble a lot of insulated sectional doors, glazed doors, and springs. You even create a lot of specialty doors that most door dealers would never consider. What does it take for a door dealer to be able to handle such challenges?

It takes an experienced team with a can-do attitude and the willingness to always look for a better way.

I recall when Garage Door Services came into your market and started to take away your customers by buying up the domain twincitygaragedoors.com (one letter away from your site at twincitygaragedoor.com). You were one of the few door dealers nationwide who were bold enough to file a lawsuit against them. What were the key lessons you learned from that experience?

I don't know if we were bold, but we were MAD! We were so incensed about what they were doing to our reputation and especially to the poor customers who had been abused by them. I took it as a personal assault on the company name that my dad had founded.

We learned that there are crooks and liars out there making a living by very unethical means. When they brought our name into it, we had to fight back. We tried to do that in many ways until we finally got the best, most expensive internet attorney we could find, and we just went for it.

It was worth every penny. The whole experience was an eye-opener into the seedy underbelly of business ethics.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul area has had its share of Bad Bobs who run garage door repair scams. When and how did you first notice this problem?

It's been at least 12 years since that nightmare began for us. Other door companies that were priced way too high probably started around the same time.

In what way have Bad Bobs changed the way you do business?

They have not changed the way we do business. But we do watch for them. Our customers often tell us horror stories of their experiences with these companies.

In 2014, your company installed 99 doors in one day at a FedEx facility in Rogers, Minn. That must be a record for our industry. What are the superior features of your company that made that accomplishment possible?

The first is Dave Saffrin, the project manager who had it all planned out. The second is a willing workforce and warehouse crew that was ready not only to earn some overtime pay but also to be a part of something awesome. Dave and the last install team did not leave the site until 8:00 that night. They would not leave until every door was done.

I noticed that APi recently gave you an award for being their most profitable company out of their 50 companies. You mentioned that you typically run around a 13% EBITDA margin. That's an impressive number. Can you name some key factors that help you generate such profitability?

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1. We have great employees.
2. Our pricing is fair but not excessive. We are lower priced than many of our competitors, but we've never aimed to be the cheapest, only the best.
3. We focus on efficiency in all areas of the business, in the office and in the field.
4. Customer service is our top priority.

You told me that you “hate waste.” Of all your waste-reduction tactics, which one makes you most proud?

It's probably our attention to efficient scheduling in the field. All our trucks have GPS. By tracking them, we can route them efficiently to their next jobs. You can lose a lot of money in scheduling if you aren't careful.

I am also a nut about recycling and controlling utilities costs. I am very frugal personally as well, and I think that is one of my best attributes. It is why I can retire at 58.

PARTING WORDS OF ADVICE

I'm truly amazed at the relationship you have with your employees. They not only like you, I think it's accurate to say that they love you. That kind of culture is very difficult for managers to generate. How did you become such an admired manager of people?

Tough question. I don't really know. I have always been a people person, interested, and caring. I am far from perfect, and I am not afraid to let them know that. In fact, I poke a lot of fun at myself, and most of it is truly warranted!

I do not focus on the being the “boss.” I'm just a regular person working here to make us the best we can be. I try to be fair but firm.

I do think it's accurate to say we love each other here, and I expect that to continue after I am gone. There will always be a piece of my heart beating within this company.

If you came back to visit TCGD in five years, what would you be most disappointed to see?

All new faces. It would mean that people are not enjoying their jobs and are leaving.

If you had to give some advice to a young and struggling door dealer, what would you say?

It's trite, but I would say to watch the little things, and the big things will take care of themselves. Every screw on the floor is money out of your pocket.

Pay no attention to what the competition is doing. Keep your nose in your own business, and do it the best you know how.

Treat your people well. Show them you are loyal to them, and they will be loyal to you.

Focus on providing the best service you can, at a fair price. Never gouge customers or sell them something they don't need.

Put a positive spin on everything you do and say. In the end, remember that it's only a job. Don't let it eat the life out of you. Do your best, but don't worry yourself to death. I wish I had worried less and handled the stress better.

If you had to give one piece of advice to a young and struggling female door dealer, what would you tell her?

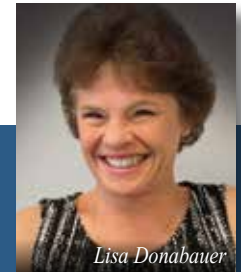
Keep your mitts up, girl. You're just as sharp as these guys you're working with. Don't be brassy, but don't back down. Listen and learn, because you don't have the field experience they do.

One thing my dad told me when I started has been invaluable: “Keep your mouth shut and your ears open.” Another RBNism is, “Anytime you start to think you're important, try showing up alone.” I have never forgotten his little pearls of unvarnished wisdom.

Now that you're retiring, I'm sure you'll miss many aspects of this job. But what is the most appealing aspect of retiring?

Lisa time! Freedom to do what I want, when I want. Not having to go to bed at 8:00 in order to get up at 4:30! Time to read all I want to read.

I have many plans, including spending time with my dad going through his business notes. He has written much down over the years. We may write a little book that is based on another RBNism. Its title is, “You Spell ‘Business’ P-E-O-P-L-E!” ■



Lisa Donabauer

About Lisa and TCGD

Sharon George, vice president of operations:

Lisa is not afraid to take risks. She is very frugal and has a great mind for business. Lisa has been a mentor to me, helping me grow. She loves to see people advance in their careers and pushes you to achieve your goals. I think that she is the reason that most of the employees at TCGD have stuck around for years.

Ron Robeck, warehouse manager:

Lisa makes smart moves at the right time. Personally, she is always right to the point. When you are done talking to her, there's not a lot of gray area.

Dave Saffrin, senior project manager:

When Lisa gives direction, she lets you go to get it done. She may check back with you for a progress report, but she doesn't watch over your shoulder to make sure you're doing it.

Sue Congdon, president:

Lisa is not one to get caught up in meetings, policies, and procedures. If something makes sense and needs to be done, we know we have her support to move ahead. Many companies miss opportunities or get bogged down because they are not able to respond quickly.

We succeed because we have high expectations of ourselves. Everyone here believes TCGD to be the best door company in town, and that is not an accident. We have succeeded by focusing on making every interaction with every customer as positive as possible. And when we screw up, we immediately own it and do anything we can to repair the damage.