

Quest for Quality



James River Air Conditioning in Richmond, VA, was founded in 1967 by Hugh E. Joyce and was initially a Trane Authorized franchise. “Trane had a dealer development program that was called the Trane DDP,” Hugh A. Joyce, president and owner of the company explains. “My father, Hugh E. Joyce, was part of that program and was very successful with it. You can trace many great contractors in America today back to a Trane DDP.”

Joyce’s father ran the company until 1995 when he sold the business to his son. Joyce had graduated from the University of Richmond with a degree in marketing and finance. He wasn’t familiar with the technical side of the business at that point, but focused on the sales and marketing.

The company serves the Richmond, VA, area and surrounding cities in central VA and still sells and services Trane equipment, although it has grown to be a multi-line dealer. “We carry Lennox, Trane, Carrier, Rheem, and we’re also working on our own brand, ‘James River Select’ which will be an Amana product,” Joyce explains.

“We’re a service and replacement business. We believe you have to have multiple lines to offer a plug-and-play option that fits and works best for the customer. If I’m only working with one manufacturer, then I may be limited in giving the customer the best solution,” Joyce says.

James River Air Conditioning serves the region’s commercial and residential HVAC markets. In addition, it offers plumbing, electrical, solar, duct cleaning, energy audits and handyman services. “We’re expanding into a couple of new markets,” Joyce says. “We’re primarily HVAC guys, but we now have six plumb-

ers. The plumbing business is a great add-on. We plan on moving into the whole-home warranty business. We really see a lot of potential in whole-home warranties. You don’t just warranty the heat pump, but the roof, the basement water proofing, the whole package.”

Work Hard, Play Hard

Joyce wants his employees to feel that they can work their way up through the business and aren’t limited to the position they were originally hired for. “The cool thing about this business is that you come in as a helper, move to technician, to manager, and to sales. There’s a process and a career path for our employees,” he asserts.

“We want people to come and stay long-term. We try to create an environment where they can earn good money and it’s enjoyable for them. We do a lot to keep the employees happy. We do a big breakfast for the whole company about once per month, and we have cookouts on certain Fridays,” Joyce explains. “I find that food is good for the soul and good for bringing people together. We try to have a few company events throughout the year, like a company picnic and a baseball game in the summer.”

In order to play hard and enjoy the extra benefits that the company provides, Joyce expects his employees to work hard. He has very high standards that must be met before he hires new employees. Not just anyone can walk in the door and get a job at James River Air Conditioning. The interview is usually a three-step process.

“The first interview is a ‘get to know’ interview,” Joyce says. “Then if they make it through that, we have them come back for testing. If they do OK during the testing process, we bring them back for a third interview. We get to know them a little bit better during this interview and then collaborate amongst ourselves to see if they fit the team here or not. We also do drug testing on every employee.”

James River employs some of the top technicians in the HVAC, plumbing, and electrical fields. Ongoing training keeps them at the top of their game.

“The company offers an annual training day,” Joyce explains. “The entire day is dedicated to training, with classes taught by

Pictured right: The James River Air residential sales team, technicians, installation crews, office staff and management gather for a photo after a company breakfast meeting.

employees, manufacturers' reps, and vendors. Subject matter ranges from basic field and safety practices to more advanced techniques for working with new technologies."

"When we have training day, it's nice to have everyone together," Tom Pugh, residential operations manager, explains. "My team is a group of 45 people. Everyone gets along well and it's a team environment. I don't want someone on my team who will throw a coworker 'under the bus' to make themselves look better. We don't have time for that here."

The company also encourages all employees to become certified through North American Technician Excellence (NATE). "Our goal is to get 100% of our technicians NATE certified," Joyce says.

To help with the training and everyday management, Joyce has two managers who help him run the residential business. Along with Residential Operations Manager Pugh, Billy Amacker is the residential general manager.

Technical, Marketing Focus

"Our management style is unique," Joyce explains. "We look at ourselves as a marketing company first. We think marketing and branding is just as important as being a technical, fix-it, and problem-solving company. I have competitors who are either good at marketing or they're good at the technical side of the business. We try to put together both."

"Tom does a great job because he knows everyone's personality," Joyce says. "He knows how to make them tick. Some take sugar, some take honey, but we've got to know how to make them be the best they can be."

"We've got a great staff here," Amacker adds. "People make this business. If you don't have good people in the field who understand that it's all about pleasing the customer, you aren't going to be successful."

Strong Regional Presence

The company plans on spending \$785,000 in 2013 on advertising, which includes TV commercials, sponsoring the weather on local TV stations, billboards, radio spots, and regular promo-

tions.

Joyce's goal is to create top-of-mind awareness for his market, and he's really becoming a household name. Just this past January, he was featured on a local TV news station's 'Positively Richmond' segment, where they showed a family in need that received a free furnace from James River Air. Joyce ran a comfort and safety promotion in December and January where he asked viewers to send in information about a family in need. This family had gone nearly two years without heat in their home, and was very thankful for the generosity of the employees of James River Air.

Joyce was also featured in a comfort and safety interview on a local news station in January. He talked about the comfort and safety promotion and gave viewers advice on changing their furnace filter, checking their thermostat, and checking their water heater for leaks. On the company website, jamesriverair.com, users can view all the commercials and TV segments that Joyce has been featured in on 'Hugh Tube' — the company's own media gallery. There is also a blog on the site that gives updates and directs users to Facebook to see photos of the latest volunteer events and company events that employees have been part of.

Joyce attributes his marketing efforts and passion for making the customer happy to the continued success and growth of James River Air over the past decade. "It's attention to the experience that the customer is receiving. Our marketing, drive, and desire to be in this business is what makes us successful," he says. "I've seen a lot of people in this industry who are just not happy being in this business. We love being in this business. We're passionate about it. Marketing, attention to experience,

being driven, and loving the business is what we're all about. The past 10 years have been some tough years. Being passionate about the business is what's gotten us through."

Quality Control

Amacker wants customers to refer to James River as a 'quality business.' "We want to keep our customers happy and we will go out of our way to do that.





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I think we go to extremes in this business to keep customers satisfied," he says. "If we do our jobs right, and give the customer the value they expect, they will call us back because they know the quality of service they will be receiving."

"We have a system of alerts that Hugh set up that work great," Amacker explains. "If someone in the field or in client services senses that there's an upset customer, an alert immediately goes out to Hugh, Tom, and myself. One of us is on the phone immediately with the client finding out what's wrong and how we can make it right. People are usually shocked that someone calls them back so quickly. They'll say 'Wow, I was upset, but I didn't think anyone would give me a call about this.' The issues can range from a big situation to something small, like a technician being 15 minutes late for an appointment."

"Over the weekend," Joyce adds, "we had an upset client who wanted to cancel her service agreement with us. I called her and emailed her that same day to address the situation. This was her response: 'Thank you very much for your call today. It's nice in today's world to see you take a personal concern in your customers. Because of your manner in handling this problem, I will continue to remain a customer.'"

"That's a big deal," Pugh adds. "If no one knew about this, that customer would be somewhere else."

James River Air offers a money back guarantee. "If a customer isn't happy, we tell them we'll take the equipment out and give them their money back," Amacker explains. "I really think that's what sets us apart in this industry and market. It costs more to get a new customer versus giving your existing customer a \$100 credit that makes them happy."

Knowing Who to Call

Technicians leave a quality control card at every service call they make. "The card can be traced back to each technician because their service number is stamped on it," Joyce explains. "Every four or five days, we get a stack of about 50 cards back in the mail. That really helps us with our quality control. Customers don't put up with much. My name is everywhere all over this

town. My personal cell number is on our website. If there's a problem, they have several ways of getting in touch with me."

When a problem comes up, Joyce and his staff speak with the technician or client service rep about how they can improve their service. If additional training is needed, they get it. Most of the time the issue can be fixed.

"Quality is a quest," Joyce explains. "In the service business, quality is ultimately made up of a few different things. It's a happy client, it's a machine that works the best it possibly can, fixing something right the first time, and making the customer glad they called us."

"Quality is the ultimate driver. The happy customer is the ultimate measure of quality. We have about 500 licensed competitors in Richmond, and they all claim that their quality is better than ours. We have to go out and create the experience. Exactly like Google, Starbucks, and Jet Blue all create an experience where the customer wants to come back again and again. We want to create that same experience."



Roger Stigall, residential HVAC service technician, crawls under a house during a service call.

Call For Standards

Joyce believes that quality can be further improved if manufacturers set standards on which companies they allow to distribute their products. "With the fact that anyone can be a dealer, it's confusing for the customer when one guy comes in from a company that pays good

wages, has 401ks and benefits for his employees, and offers what that company's cost is for a certain air conditioner. The other guy that shows up is a one-man show, works out of his garage and offers the same air conditioner for a lot less. The customer goes crazy.

Anyone can be a dealer and there's no accountability. If a dealer of a Ford motor company were selling Fords at 50% less than everyone else, he would be in big trouble. But, in our market there are no financial controls. You can purchase equipment online and have it put in without permits. At the end of the day, what we're finding is that the consumer is the one getting hurt because the units aren't installed correctly."

Change and Opportunity

The HVACR industry is always changing and with technology playing a bigger role, it's



James River Air specializes in energy services including solar solutions. Pictured above is a solar panel array over a car port.

going to change at a faster pace. "With wireless technology and communicating thermostats, at some point these machines are going to fix themselves," Joyce says. "We must respond to change right along with it. Customers are changing along with the technologies. They're demanding more for less."

Joyce sees opportunity with the changes in the industry. "Even though the industry is changing, we still need to have great talent, technicians, and installers. One area of opportunity is in recruiting female technicians. As long as they're comfortable crawling under a house and getting their hands dirty, they can do everything a male technician can do. We'd like to develop a career path for female technicians here at James River Air."

Joyce plans on making a commercial that markets towards women, asking if they'd be interested in working in a technical field where they'd never have to worry about being unemployed. "We're trying to reach past the technical schools and into the general public. Our goal is to get at least four or five apprentice level maintenance technicians who are female. I know they're out there and I want them to know the opportunities that are available to them."

In addition to running the everyday affairs of this growing business, Joyce makes time to give back to the community. One of his current ads shows Joyce surrounded by dogs with the saying "Hugh let the dogs out." It offers that if a customer purchases any system, a donation will be made to the Richmond Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). The list of organizations that James River Air donates to and helps ranges from Habitat for Humanity to Toys for Tots. To see the extensive list of organizations, go to the community service page on the jamesriverair.com site.

Thinking outside the box when it comes to his marketing and branding efforts will continue to help Hugh Joyce take James River Air to the next level and grow. "We'd like to grow in a controlled, logical way," he says. "We want to start making acquisitions and have businesses in the five key areas that we service. We'd like to eventually have a \$100 million dollar market."

James River Air has proven that creating a customer experience that truly makes the customer happy, and doing that every time they're called, will bring a business to the top. The quest for quality that the people working at James River have, has made this company an award-winning company that will be one to watch for years to come. For all these reasons and more, *ContractingBusiness.com* magazine is proud to present **James River Air Conditioning** with the **2013 Residential HVAC Contractor of the Year Award**. 



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