

## PROFILE: A FAMILY AFFAIR



By Matt Alderton

In Sarnia, Ont., everyone knows your name, if your name is Langstaff, that is. The community across the St. Clair River from Port Huron, Mich., is home to a large, extended family of fathers, sons, uncles, brothers and cousins—many of them contractors, all of them with the surname Langstaff—who faithfully serve the citizens of Sarnia when they need something fixed, patched, built or installed.

"In this area, our last name is really good and really well known," says George Langstaff. "It makes business really, really easy."

Langstaff, co-owner of George Langstaff & Sons Construction in Sombra, Ont., approximately 42 kilometers downriver from Sarnia, is celebrating 10 years as an independent business owner specializing in exterior installations and repairs, including siding, soffit, fascia, windows, doors and roofing.

"If you knew our last name, it's all about control," he says with a chuckle. "When I worked for other people, I could not control my destiny. I loved what I did, but I wanted to be independent. I wanted control."

Now he has it, and business is booming. The company brings in about \$1.5 million in sales each year through a combination of jobs, both large and small. "That's pretty good for our tiny little company," he says. "When you work for yourself, whatever drive and vim and vigor you put into it, that's what you get out of it."

### Leaving the nest

Langstaff grew up in Brigden, Ont., as one of seven brothers—five of which now work in construction. His father, a farmer, instilled in him a strong work ethic at an early age.

"As kids, you worked on the farm, you did your schooling and then you went and got a job," Langstaff recalls. "We usually worked for family members. We had a couple of cousins with construction companies. I worked for one of them for three years building pole barns."

After that, Langstaff worked for one of his brothers. In addition to building pole barns, he did roofing, siding and eavestroughing. "I loved what I did," he says. "I did it for \$8 an hour [when I started], and I was the happiest man in Ontario."

After about 15 years of working for various relatives, Langstaff determined he would make a better employer than employee. So in 2002, he decided to leave the Langstaff family nest and start his own business.

### Mission: Superior customer service

George Langstaff & Sons Construction started as a family endeavor, and it remains a family endeavor. Langstaff, who now has five crews and 15 employees, is in charge of sales and estimates. His wife, Tammy, takes care of customer service, communications, accounting and bookkeeping. Langstaff's youngest son, Bradley, handles pick-ups and deliveries, assists with estimates and installations and runs his own crew. His oldest son, Rodney, has his own business but assists part-time with labor when he's available.

"My sons and wife have been totally supportive," says Langstaff, who was fueled by his sons' enthusiasm for the business in its early days. "We started out with one black truck and one black trailer. When he was 11, my youngest son would go outside every evening and wash the truck inside and out to keep it shiny."

Today, Langstaff's reputation is just as sterling. The reason, he says: He puts his clients first with superior customer service. For example, Sarnia is home to a large population of factory workers, many of whom work irregular hours. To accommodate their schedules, Langstaff does estimates day or night, seven days a week. His wife, meanwhile, meets with customers in person after every job to make sure they're satisfied. If they aren't, Langstaff's crews return the next day to make sure the job is completed to the customer's satisfaction.

"Your customers have to be happy so they will tell their friends, neighbors and relatives about you so your business will continue to grow," Langstaff says. "I had a lady call [recently] with a little issue from two years ago. It was a small flashing issue on a roof. This lady, it just so happened, was my Grade 4 teacher. I had two guys there within the hour."

### Shopping for smiles

Because he tries so hard to provide good customer service, Langstaff is especially appreciative when he receives it from those he works with, including the employees at the first Lowe's store in Sarnia, which opened in late 2011.

"As a contractor, you have a lot on your mind," Langstaff says. "But when you walk into Lowe's, they're smiling from ear to ear. They say, 'Hey George, how's it going?' It sounds corny, but it makes you feel good."

Lowe's friendly service keeps Langstaff a loyal customer. What made him a customer in the first place were the store's affordable prices. The commercial sales team at the Sarnia Lowe's contacted Langstaff prior to the store's opening. When they told him about Lowe's Volume Discount Pricing program, he opened a Lowe's Business Account.

"Since we opened, George comes in on a regular basis," says Shawn Oxley, a Lowe's commercial sales specialist at the Sarnia location. "We go out of our way to cater to him. And with volume pricing, he gets discounts of anywhere from 5 to 30 percent, depending on what items he picks."

Langstaff, who recently became a Lowe's installer of roofing, siding, soffit, fascia and troughing, often takes advantage of the Volume Discount Pricing program by combining several small jobs into one large order.

Thanks to Oxley, who used to own his own construction company, Lowe's has helped Langstaff generate quotes for his customers. "George loves the fact that I can take any blueprints he drops off and give him an estimate on materials," Oxley says. "I can explain how to build 90 percent of the things he wants to build."

With Lowe's in its corner and the name "Langstaff" on its business cards, the phone is ringing off the hook at George Langstaff & Sons Construction. And that's exactly the way Langstaff likes it.

"I like the phone to be noisy," he says, stressing that he owes every phone call to his family. "From the day I started this business, I never looked back because I knew they were pushing me."

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