

Robertson Heating Supply Co. supports Alliance and beyond

Built around the idea of supplying contractors with the supplies they need, when they need it, Robertson Heating Supply Co. has grown from a single shop in Alliance to a wholesale chain in three states.



John Hampu propels a "mouse" used to gather small parts for shipping.

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Alliance

If customers place an order by 10 p.m., the Midnight Shuttle trucks can get the supplies to more than half of the company's 31 branches, some as far away as Columbus and Pittsburgh, by the next morning.

With \$100 million in sales this year and active accounts with 2,500 contractors in six states, there's a decent chance the furnace keeping you warm this winter passed through Robertson's headquarters in the Alliance Commerce Park. Not bad for a 79-year-old business that started as a coal-furnace wholesaler during the Great Depression.

ONE-STOP SHOP

The concept driving Robertson's decades-long growth is a simple one: Give plumbers and heating, ventilation and cooling contractors the supplies they need, when they need them.

"That's the value we offer, that one-stop shop," said President Scott Robertson.

The philosophy hasn't changed much since Robertson's grandfather, John Robertson, started the company in 1934.

The elder Robertson was working in the family coal business when he began selling and installing furnaces. The equipment came from Cleveland, which was a long drive before the days of interstates, so John Robertson got an idea. He would make the trip and stock the furnaces, if local contractors agreed to buy from him.

"In 1934, nobody had much money," Scott Robertson said. "To start a company that year had to take some guts."

Realizing that contractor convenience was key to growth, the company started reaching beyond the Alliance area. John Robertson opened branches in Canton and Zanesville in 1945, and a warehouse in Steubenville six years later.

The expansion continued in the 1960s. The company built its Canton warehouse at Sixth Street and Dueber Avenue SW. It also opened small stores, some with a single employee, in communities such as New Philadelphia, East Liverpool, Sandusky, Newark and Beaver Falls, Pa. John Robertson called them twigs.

"The good news is some of these twigs have grown to be bigger branches," Scott Robertson said.

Today, the company has about 260 employees at 31 branches in Ohio, western Pennsylvania and Michigan.

"About every 20 to 30 miles there's a Robertson location," Scott Robertson said.

THE HUB

Big enough to hold three football fields, the 217,000-square-foot Alliance warehouse is the hub of the business. There are furnaces and water heaters and pipes of all sizes and materials. Row after row of gray shelves hold bins of brackets and connectors.

The company stocks 13,000 different products from 179 brands, including Rheem, Ruud, Tempstar, Moen and American Standard.

Forklifts hum around the building, stacking boxes and pallets for the company's fleet of 60 delivery trucks, including 7 semis.

"If you tell them, 'Hey, I'm going to use this many widgets,' they're going to have that many widgets, if you help them plan their inventory levels," said Jeff Reed, vice president of retail operations for Custom Air Conditioning and Heating Co. in Gahanna.

Robertson is one of three or four wholesalers with whom Custom does business, primarily at the Columbus and Lancaster branches.

"What I think sets Robertson's aside from a lot of people is Scott Robertson. While he's the president, he has no problem coming out and meeting with his customers and truly finding out what their needs are," said Reed, who is the incoming state president of the Air Conditioning Contractors of America.

Plumbing and heating contractors are the core of Robertson's business, accounting for 90 percent of sales. But the company also has engineers who design heating and cooling systems, as well as five retail showrooms, including one at the Alliance headquarters, where the general public can buy toilets, bathtubs, faucets, sinks and KraftMaid cabinets.

BIG EXPANSION

Throughout its growth, the company has been rooted in the Alliance community. In 1953, John Robertson built a new warehouse on West Main Street for \$600,000, an investment worth \$5.2 million today. The company expanded the location in the late 1970s, but by 2003 the offices and warehouse were limiting the company's growth. The family faced a choice.

"Do we keep coasting and do the best we can out of a tight facility, or do we try to grow the company and take it to the next level," Scott Robertson said.

They decided to build the warehouse and a 68,000 square-foot office building in the Commerce Park at a cost of \$20 million. Construction finished in 2004.

Alliance is fortunate to have several companies that have stayed in the city as they have grown, such as Coastal Pet and Terry's Tire Town, said Mark Locke, president of the Alliance Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Robertson's is one of those, and people just don't realize what we have here," Locke said.

LOOKING AHEAD

Shortly after building its new headquarters, Robertson Heating Supply Co. found itself in the economic slowdown of 2008 and 2009.

For the first time, the company laid off workers; other employees saw their hours cut.

"It was a difficult two-year period but you come out of it stronger," Scott Robertson said. "You come out of it better."

The company is now experiencing its third year of steady increases and cracked \$100 million in sales for the first time this year. In March, it bought the Columbus and Cincinnati HVAC divisions of Palmer-Donavin, and future expansion will probably happen through acquisition, Scott Robertson said.

"They just make good, solid business decisions," Locke said. "They obviously went through a very tough time during the recession because they depend a lot on new home builds and new home builds were almost nonexistent, and they came through that excellently."

Scott Robertson has led the company since 1991. His father, Ed, and sisters Sue Neil, Lori Keller and Linda Wonner also have roles with the company, and hopes are for the fourth generation to eventually take over the family enterprise.

Robertson Heating Supply Co. is on the verge on its 80th anniversary, but what will the company look like at 100?

Scott Robertson said he hopes it will have 50 branches, \$200 million in sales and 350 employees, while remaining a personable, employee-friendly business that is family-owned and still based in Alliance.

"This is home," Robertson said. "This is where it all started."