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Michael Carlo, president of Innovative Air Solutions

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Terry Tanker met with Michael Carlo, managing partner of [Innovative Air Solutions](#) in Mt. Vernon, N.Y., a [2016 Tops in Trucks Fleet Design Contest](#) winner. The two discussed starting a business from scratch, learning on the job and evolving as a marketer.



1. How did you initially get involved in the industry?

I've been around the business my entire life. My father worked for a wholesale distributor and still does. My brother and I worked in the warehouse during the summer. We learned how to drive forklifts and eventually made deliveries to job sites. One year, while on college break, my father said, "I think you should try something different this summer; would you like to take a crack at installs?"

2. Who did you go out with?

He had a contractor friend who needed help. He had a lot of work in diners, catering halls and restaurants. We were exposed to a lot — furnace replacements, duct work, transformers ... a little bit of everything.

3. Is that when you knew you wanted to own your own contracting business?

My brother, Matthew, and I never had any intention of owning a contracting firm. In fact, after we graduated we opened retail



stores, selling phones, pagers and electronics. The big carriers like Sprint and Verizon were getting into that business so we sold out just before 9/11. It was a timely decision.

4. Did you use the proceeds of the sale to start Innovative Air Solutions?

Yes, but it took some time to come to that conclusion. In the end, we thought we could capitalize on our past experience and all of the contacts my father had. Matthew and I started in the basement of our mother's house — we each own 50 percent of the company.

5. What were your responsibilities then?

We got busy quickly. All of the sudden, you find yourself in a van with tools in your hands. It was bittersweet. I went to college and thought, "I don't want to be in an attic." But, we always held the concept that to explain it, sell it and manage it, you have to do it.

6. How long were you out on the road?

Five years, then we graduated to the next level. In fact, many co-workers from the first wave of hiring we did then are still with us today, 16 years later.



7. What type of work were you doing?

Almost 100 percent was installation. We didn't start doing service work until later. Installations were straightforward and we were sticklers for leaving a job better than we found it. The install had to be straight, level and plumb and before we left everything needed to be cleaner than we found it — shoe covers, drop clothes ... everything.

8. So you didn't really have formal training as an HVACR technician?

That's correct, but I read a lot of books then. I'd burn out a transformer and then go home and read a book. Over time, between the books and being on site, I learned a lot about what to do and what not to do. Eventually, I had formal training, attended classes and became licensed in all of our surrounding counties and the state of Conn. I'm also NATE certified.

9. When did you start to become such sophisticated marketers?

We were late to that party. It wasn't until a few years ago that we started to even think about marketing. Word of mouth was what kept fueling our growth. We hired a consultant to help us in 2012 and she really opened our eyes.

10. Is that when you decided to get serious about your fleet design?

Yes. We hired a firm to design a logo for us and we drove the guy nuts with changes, but in the end it turned out great. And the color palate is actually the Detroit Tigers' colors. Many think it looks like the New York Mets' colors, but it's the Tigers.

11. How many do you have on the road?

Ten Ford Transits and Ford Transit Connects, all wrapped. We recently switched over from Chevys. We ordered them with a lot of extras — back-up cameras, larger mirrors on the side, Bluetooth ... I wanted our technicians to really want to drive the vans and be proud about doing so. It seems to be working.

12. Do you use GPS tracking?

Yes. The guys know they are getting tracked on speed, idle time and efficiency.

13. What other marketing are you doing?

We're close to launching a new website. It's been a lot of work, but I'm happy with what I've seen and we're excited about getting it launched.

14. How are you selling maintenance contracts?

We just changed it; we were billing monthly and it wasn't working. Obviously, it's a small bill for the customer but it really was a lot of work. Because of new cards being issued, security chips, etc., we were chasing customers for monthly memberships. So we canned that, and went to one flat rate fee that covers everything behind the front door.

15. Do you specialize in any type of work?

Yes, mini duct high velocity The Unico System. We have more than 2,500 systems installed locally. They're perfectly suited to homes we have here in Westchester, Conn. and Manhattan. Our rep from Unico helped us install the very first system in Westchester more than 20 years ago. We also use Trane because of their reliability and dependability.

16. Do you also do commercial work?

Yes; Matt handles those jobs. He has all the plans in his office. We have a \$200,000 LG job right now in Manhattan; it's a brownstone. The total project will be worth \$16 million when it's done!

17. How did you get that job?

We were contracted through the general contractor. Matt has been handling all aspects — meeting with the GC, the project management team, foreman and the homeowners. Obviously, we'll handle any warranty work but we want the maintenance agreement too.

18. How do you like to manage the business?

I'm hands-on, but Matt and I share all the responsibilities. I handle most customer issues, the office, financial end and business planning. Matt handles daily operations and management of our technicians. And, of course we both still sell.

19. Do your technicians sell too?

Yes, they do. They act as a filter. For example, they might say, "Mike, this is the situation ... this is what the customer has, this is what they need — could you put together a proposal? I'm sitting with them right this second, they are without heat, they're AC isn't working or they're out of hot water." This selling system works well for us.

20. What's your favorite thing about running the company?

I enjoy being the guy behind the curtain, working on strategy. I don't enjoy the tactical stuff nearly as much. I enjoy getting out of the office every once in a while, breaking up the day, but if I could be buried in the office working on advertising, finance, the website, putting together systems and structure ... that's my passion.

Articles by Terry Tanker

Somewhere on a Beach

When business as usual seems more difficult, take a step back and think about the last time you took some time off.

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Michael Carlo, president of Innovative Air Solutions



Michael Carlo, managing partner of Innovative Air Solutions in Mt. Vernon, N.Y., discusses starting a business from scratch, learning on the job and evolving as a marketer.

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Don Rackler, president of Jon Wayne Service Company



Don Rackler, president of Jon Wayne Service Company in San Antonio, discusses company culture, hiring for attitude, learning leadership from his Army father and his company's namesake, John Wayne.

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Time Flies When You're Having Fun

It's been 10 years since we rebranded this magazine as HVACR Business and, while a lot has changed, we've stayed true to our mission — publish great business management content that helps contractors manage their businesses better, and have fun while doing it.

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Carmine Galletta, owner of GallettAir, Inc.



Carmine Galletta, owner of GallettAir Inc. in Long Island, N.Y. and the very first winner of the Tops in Trucks Fleet Design Contest, discusses fleet design, business, family and what's changed since 2007.

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