



Andrew Kay catches up with Brent Kearney of Woodmans at their team breakfast

How long has Woodmans been in existence?

About eight years in its current format. I started it on my own after finding frustration with the limited services offered by builders on my own project. I had experience in the building trade and it seemed natural and logical to go back to something that I knew.

Did you have a clear vision from the start of how you wanted the business to be?

Yes, I wanted to create a construction company that would deal with all areas of the business with a dedicated and fully employed team of experts and professionals. I was very aware of the frustrations involved with dealing with building firms who used contractors to complete certain parts of the job. I wanted to offer an end to end service to my clients who would have to deal with only one person.

Did it take you long to pull together the Woodmans team?

Yes, I have been incredibly selective as I only wanted the very best. Some of the team were already running their own businesses, so I had to persuade them that in becoming part of the Woodmans team, they would still be able to see the valuable difference their presence would make.

How many are there in the team?

Currently 17 – including the administrative staff – and three apprentices.

Are apprenticeships a valuable part of how you operate?

Definitely. Our first ever apprentice is now a fully qualified plumber who runs this sector of the business. Our apprenticeship scheme helps us to select, train and retain the brightest and most conscientious tradesmen of which the benefits are obvious. In addition, this scheme gives young trades people exposure to mature and experienced professionals in a secure team environment.

So what is the mainstay of the business right now?

We are currently working directly for architects on prestige projects where a very exacting standard of work is essential. Having a team that includes real craftsmen gives us the edge over other building firms. It's great that some of the older guys are able to share their expertise and experience with the younger members of the team. One of our plasterers has been with us since day one and enjoys our way of working so much that he commutes from London every day to work for Woodmans.

Working at this top level, does it make Woodmans an expensive firm to employ?

You might think that, but actually with our experience and means of team working, we have found that we have saved our clients a lot of money and heartache. We offer a full project management service and always work on a fixed cost contract. We have found that competitors have originally quoted quite low, but have been ignorant of less obvious costs which have resulted in the total costs to the client spiralling. With Woodmans, this problem never occurs. We may initially seem a little more expensive, but with our costing so transparent and rigid, I have a list of clients who would happily tell you that the confidence they have is worth far over and above the fees we charge.

What is the most complicated part of the work that you do?

Without a doubt, it is ensuring the quality of the finish we achieve. This pursuit of excellence must be and is what drives our team. We only take final payment for our work when the entire project is complete and the client is completely and utterly satisfied with what we have done. Some builders shy away from jobs where a client seems to have a very precise brief and exacting standards, but this is the kind of work we love, deriving no greater pleasure than rising to the brief. By doing this, we know that clients will return to us again and again and refer their friends over to a team they know they can trust.

Do you see the company growing any larger?

We have always been very careful to control our growth as we never want to employ people who compromise the standard of the work we complete. We have clients asking us to take on more work, but will only do that when we know we have the right team in place to deliver the same standard of excellence that we have been known for.

Are other builders following your model?

They are, and we think that is a good thing for the trade in general. Customers are demanding a higher standard and professionals like Woodmans are happy to deliver that.

What is coming up in 2008?

We are putting a split-level mezzanine apartment into one of the French Apartments in Kemp Town. It's going to be a very high spec job with incredible steelwork that will need to be lifted in by crane. It's going to be a very demanding build and require all of our combined skills, a challenge the team are more than eager to start.

Is any job to big or too small?

Well, we never touch a job over £500,000, simply because with the team that we have we could not get that scale for the job done in the time required and to the standards that I demand. However, we have actually completed larger amounts of work than that for single clients but with the work phased into smaller projects. As for small, well we are often asked to look at small conversions and loft extensions. These days we assess each project as it comes along and only take on work if we believe we are the right people to do that job.

So things are looking good at Woodmans?

Yes, and that is down to the excellent guys on the team and the way in which they integrate with the local specialist manufacturers and suppliers to follow the vision of the top quality architects, inspiring designers and great clients. *to register for future projects go to www.woodmans.net or call 01903 531090*