

Eagle Feather Awards LARGE BUSINESS WINNER

Doing what comes naturally

Taction, a Waldoboro customer service center, relies on its core values to grow its business

BY MICHAELA CAVALLARO

In a small conference room on the second floor of Taction's Waldoboro headquarters, a homemade quilt hangs on the wall. It's a folksy touch that warms the room. But when you get a closer look at the quilt, it also reveals something of the company's character: Each of the quilt's squares focuses on a particular aspect of workplace safety — one says "Stretch — it's good," while another emphasizes the importance of knowing fire escape routes. The phrase "safety in the workplace" repeats around the quilt's borders. Next to the quilt hangs a large, framed stained glass window with the slogan, "At Taction, safety comes in cans — You can, we can, I can."

Taction is a call center — essentially, an office building full of cubicles and private offices, which makes its emphasis on workplace safety a bit unusual. "You don't think of [safety] much in this environment," admits Hank Berg, Taction's president and COO. "But our employee safety committee has done a lot of great work."

One of the committee's accomplishments is evident in the quilt and stained glass window, which were created for a 2002 contest in which Taction's 145

employees were divided into teams to create workplace safety posters. While CEO and founder Steve White notes that even the teams that stuck to posterboard and magazine clippings created better-than-average posters, he's clearly impressed by — and proud of — the effort and engagement required in the quilt and the window. It's indicative of the best compliment White says he's gotten from one of Taction's clients, a company much larger — and much older — than Taction, whose CEO told White, "When our company grows up, I want our culture to be like your culture."

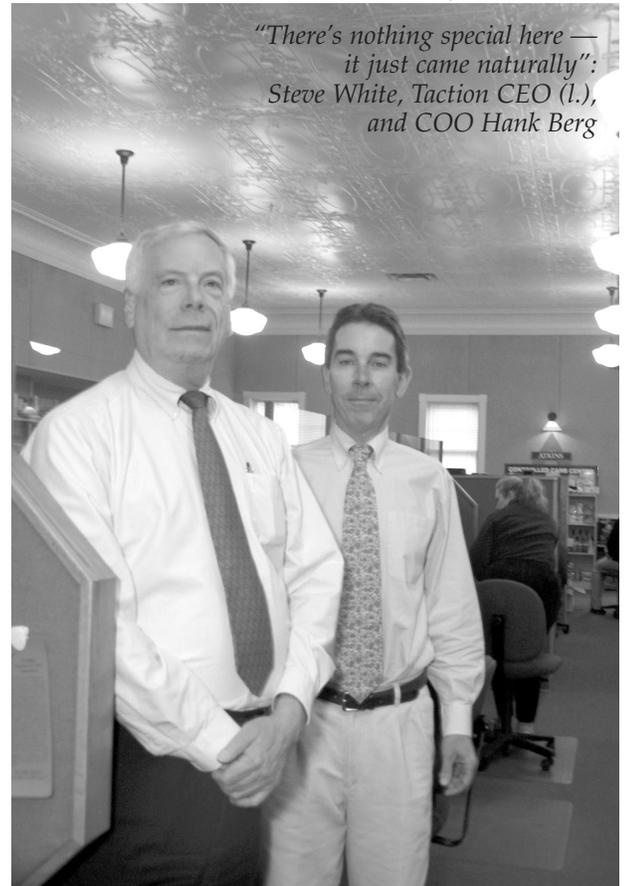
That culture, which centers on employee involvement, community engagement and relentless attention to customer service, has earned Taction this year's Eagle Feather award for large companies from Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility.

For White, who in 1983 founded the business as the New England 800 Company, the adoption of those values was entirely natural, something he says he learned as a child by watching the way his father, a manager at a plumbing and heating firm in Richmond, Va., interacted with employees. So, in the early days of New England 800, it seemed obvious that every employee would have a key to the office, and that every week would end with a casual conversation among the whole staff — all six or eight employees — about the mistakes they'd made that week. That discussion would culminate in a vote on who'd done the dumbest thing on a call; the winner would receive

a pair of movie tickets — an effort, White says, both to learn from one another's mistakes and to reinforce a sense of trust within the company.

What wasn't necessarily obvious, though, is that those practices would continue to this day and, White says, "set the stage for an awful lot [of policies and programs] that have developed since then," including an innovative employee training program called Taction U, an internal mentoring program that was conceived by employees and a profit-sharing program that distributes returns monthly. However, he cautions, those policies did get more complicated — and more costly — as the company grew. "Is it more expensive [to have this culture]? Yes," White says. "Do we agonize over it sometimes? Yes."

The payoff, though, comes in both personal satisfaction and in quantifiable business measures. Employee turnover at Taction ranges from eight percent to 17% annually, less than half the 33% average turnover rate reported by Mercer Human Resource Consulting in its 2003 Call



"There's nothing special here — it just came naturally": Steve White, Taction CEO (l.), and COO Hank Berg

Taction

251 Jefferson St., Waldoboro

CEO: Steve White

Founded: 1983

Employees: 145

Service: Phone and e-mail customer service for consumer products companies

Revenues, 2003: Did not disclose

Contact: 832-0800

www.taction.com

Center Compensation Survey. Though neither White nor Berg will disclose revenue figures, they say the company has experienced sustained profitability over the last several years, following some bumps in the late 1990s. And one Taction client, luxury retailer Chanel, was so pleased with the company's performance that it nominated Taction for *Call Center Magazine's* Customer Care Team of the Year Leadership Award, which Taction won late last year.

E-commerce in the Oddfellows hall

White moved from Virginia to Maine in part to get away from what he calls "some things that are contraindicators of socially responsible business practices." He had a diverse background — a master's in education of the deaf from Smith College, several years working at Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Mass., followed by a position as director of development for a public television station in northern Virginia and, immediately prior to founding New England 800, a post as director of sales and marketing for a computer services firm in Gaithersburg, Md.

In one way or another, White says, each of those positions helped prepare him to launch his own company, which he originally conceived as a toll-free reservations service for innkeepers. The business plan quickly changed, though, when White realized that innkeepers really only needed the service about six weeks a year — and he needed revenue all 52 weeks. By the time the company took its first calls in a small Rockland office in December of 1983, it had signed up Camden-based Down East Enterprises' book publishing division, which is a client to this day, and a New England magazine publisher.

Eventually, the company transitioned into working for catalog companies, always with an emphasis on employee training so callers would receive top-flight customer service. In 1995, White oversaw renovation of an old Oddfellows hall near Waldoboro's Main Street for the company's new headquarters; the third floor still features the original tin ceilings — a feature that increases the sound levels in the room, but also gives it a character that's often lacking in corporate phone banks.

Along the way, the company's business became heavily weighted toward the fourth quarter. It experienced 30% annual growth for six years in the 1990s, but the combination of Y2K preparations and that fourth-quarter revenue spike put financial pressure on the company; White says

LARGE BUSINESS RUNNERS-UP

Camden National Bank, Camden

The 129-year-old bank focuses on exceeding customers' expectations and involving its 103 employees in all aspects of operations. The institution remains committed to local ownership and encourages employee volunteerism.

Tom's of Maine, Kennebunk

The 33-year-old company uses all natural ingredients in its extensive line of personal care products. Tom's stresses employee wellness and encourages its 160 employees to use five percent of their paid work time to volunteer in the community. The company also sponsors river awareness and dental health programs for the general public.

Wright Express, South Portland

Wright Express, which provides corporate charge cards as well as private label fleet cards, experiences low turnover among its 600 employees as a result of aggressive policies on training, incentive pay and employee recognition. The company has been active in efforts to increase education levels in Maine.

New England 800 "took a break" from its rapid growth around the millennium and, as a result, began to develop a long-term strategic plan.

The fruits of that planning became apparent in 2001, when the company was renamed Taction — New England 800 implied both a geographic limit and a preference for the phone, rather than the e-commerce applications its customers increasingly utilize — and the position of COO was created. Berg, a Newcastle native who'd spent more than 20 years at Sanders, a Lockheed Martin company, was hired to fill the job. Taction also began soliciting new clients with year-round sales cycles; Atkins Nutritionals, the original purveyor of low-carb products, was particularly helpful in leveling out the company's volume.

Today, White and Berg say the future looks bright. Taction is actively hiring agents, particularly for its new contract with Boyds Bears, a teddy bear retailer. And since many new hires haven't worked in a professional setting prior to joining Taction, plans remain in place to offer them comprehensive training in subjects ranging from basic spelling to creative thinking and conflict resolution. Still, says White, "We are not saints. There's nothing special here — it just came naturally."

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