

REP PROFILE

Making a difference

Woolf-Harris continues investing in itself and its channel partners

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Editorial director

With a background that includes executive management at a major plumbing manufacturer, Woolf-Harris Inc. president Martin Sharpe can certainly identify with the needs and interests of the lines his agency represents. This understanding and respect — along with other key attributes — have been major factors in the growth of Woolf-Harris Inc.

A premier manufacturers' rep firm covering Louisiana, Tennessee and Mississippi, Woolf-Harris recently moved into a new 22,000-square-foot facility in Mandeville (New Orleans), La. The facility includes both office space and a 16,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art warehouse that allows Woolf-Harris the opportunity to better manage its inventory and turns.

"With the housing market suffering though one of the worst recessions during my tenure in the plumbing industry, one could argue that this was the worst possible time to make that kind of investment," said Sharpe. "On the other hand, we have always invested heavily in our business and this venture was no exception. Our agency was built to provide a high level of service for our customer base, and our design/training center will be used to supplement those beautiful customer showrooms that we have in our market."

In addition to providing a pleasant and efficient work environment for staff, the facility showcases a combination conference and design center that provides an excellent venue for displaying products represented by Woolf-Harris.



The Mandeville facility's reception area offers a warm, home-like welcome to visitors.



Seated in a conference room are (l-r) Tim Haws, manager of the Showroom Business unit; Jeremy Sharpe, VP-sales; Martin Sharpe, president; Andrew Sharpe, VP-operations; and Howard Boykin, manager of the Commercial Business unit.

The agency continually interfaces with many of its key builders in regard to product specification, and the design center gives the builders an opportunity to actually see and touch the products rather than just looking at brochures.

Woolf-Harris also uses the facility for customer training at both the wholesale and contractor level. Previously, when the firm hosted such events, they had to be held at off-site locations.

Sharpe's unique viewpoint as a former executive at Aqua Glass has helped shape the way with which he works with the manufacturers Woolf-Harris represents. In 1981, Sharpe was recruited by Aqua Glass Corporation to be their national sales manager. Just two years later, he was promoted to vice president-sales and marketing. In that role, Sharpe

was responsible for launching new products, developing new markets, seeking out and hiring representatives for those markets, developing support and promotional materials for products being



Woolf-Harris' new 22,000-square-foot facility in Mandeville (New Orleans), La., includes office and warehouse space.

launched, as well as a myriad of other activities that were geared to the overall development of the Aqua Glass long-range business plan. Sharpe remained with Aqua Glass for 12 years following its acquisition by Masco Corporation in 1983, eventually resigning in 1995 to move to New Orleans and purchase the Woolf-Harris sales agency.

"During my years at Aqua Glass, I became aware of how a sales agency functioned and the idea of wrapping my arms around a smaller organization quite frankly appealed to me," said Sharpe. "I have now been at Woolf-Harris for 13 years and would like to think that through the development of our core values, vision and mission statements, along with the implementation of our systems, customer care initiatives and staff upgrades (outside and inside), we have been able to make a difference in our ability to meet the needs of the customers we serve, as well as the manu-

facturers we represent."

Having such a background in executive management also instilled in Sharpe the value of both short- and long-term planning. He is diligent about driving the planning process at Woolf-Harris.

"We firmly believe that you cannot stay abreast of rapidly changing market conditions unless you are committed to a short and long range planning strategy," he said. "That we said we implemented an off site planning retreat initiative utilizing the skills of an outside business facilitator approximately five years ago and it has proved to be invaluable. Our new facility, expansion into the Tennessee territory, customer contact management, live chat on the website and line reviews were all initiatives borne out of our planning process. Naturally, the entire process is worthless unless you are willing as a team to review your progress or failure on a systematic basis. That said, we set aside time at our quarterly executive meetings to review our plan and make adjustments as needed. It is also important to note that each member of our executive team has signed a commitment document which verbalizes the fact that they will be accountable to the other team members and to the corporate plan."

Bricks and mortar

In addition to the Mandeville, La., location, Woolf-Harris has sales offices in Memphis, Tenn., and Jackson, Miss. The agency fields 12 outside sales repre-

sentatives living in their respective markets, 10 staff members who are dedicated to the responsibility of providing customer care and clerical support, along with two warehouse staff members.

"We feel it is important to have staff members who are held accountable for critical business segments; therefore, we have designated leaders for the Showroom, Builder and Commercial business units within the framework of our company," Sharpe noted. "We also believe very heavily in succession planning and have worked diligently to put our plan for the future in place. For what it's worth, every member of our executive team is CPMR certified."

Woolf-Harris represents some of the industry's leading manufacturers including: Delta Faucet Company (Brizo, Peerless and Delta Commercial), A.O. Smith Water Products, State Industries, BrassCraft, Alsons, Church, Cole and Company, Coral Industries, Erico,



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Liberty Hardware, Spurlin Industries, Watco, Woodford, Plastic Trends, Mr. Steam, Sunroc/Oasis, TEKA, Vitra, Jetta Corporation and Ponte Giulio. While some are not represented by Woolf-Harris across all its territorial boundaries, all are represented by the agency in one or more of those states.

“It’s important to note that there is a great deal of synergy in the lines that we represent,” explained Sharpe. “We feel it is important to offer a complete package of products to whomever we may be calling on, i.e. builder, plumber, wholesaler or specifier — and it is equally important to offer a good mix of residential as well as commercial products.”

Woolf-Harris uses its warehouse to supplement and support the needs of its customer base. Several years ago, company leaders made the decision to become involved in the buy/sell arena when they took on the Vitra line of vitreous china. Today, Woolf-Harris provides a local inventory of Vitra products, A.O. Smith commercial water heaters, Plastic Trends large-diameter fittings, TEKA stainless steel sinks and Woodford products.

“We think it’s important for our customers to know that our inventory is there to support their sales initiatives,” noted Sharpe.

With their headquarters in New Orleans and other locations serving the Gulf Coast, Woolf-Harris has experienced first-hand the continued effects of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Now that the hurricane recovery is no longer front-page news, many around the country feel that rebuilding is done and business is back to normal.

“Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth,” said Sharpe. “Due to a lack of funding, the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the Greater New Orleans markets have a great deal of work left to be done. Our New Orleans population is a fraction of what it was pre-Katrina. Many of the residential areas hardest hit by the storm have not been rebuilt. The

one bright spot in the market has been the commercial segment. Single-family construction may be down, but casino reconstruction and the building of new commercial facilities is flourishing. It’s important to note that those of us who live here love it — and we will be back!”

Training takes center stage

Another way that Woolf-Harris supports its customers and manufacturers is through training.

“We feel that training is one of the key

or developing modules specifically to meet their needs.

“We would be remiss if we did not also mention that the training concept carries over to our contractors and specifiers as well. People sell or specify those products with which they are comfortable; therefore, the training and selling process never ends.”

Sharpe said that most of Woolf-Harris’ manufacturing partners

are on the cutting edge of new product trending and provide the firm with a



Six of Woolf-Harris’ customer care representatives are (l-r) seated: Anne Gilmore, Dawn DuFrene, Lura King, standing: Bruce Gilmore, Joel King, Patrick Brown.

elements for an effective agency and, therefore, we try to provide training on one or more of our lines on every call we make,” Sharpe said. “This sometimes becomes an issue since every one of our customers is pressed for time. As a result, we try to be flexible in the process by conducting sessions whenever our customers’ staff members might be available. We find it refreshing that many of our manufacturing partners are now beginning to see the benefit of either including our customers’ staff members in their e-learning campaigns

great deal of information. In addition, Sharpe and his team make the most of industry events such as ISH, the International Builders Show and K/BIS to gain insight into new technology and products. They also rely on the internet as a source for new product information and trends in the global arena as well as the domestic market.

“As an agency, we also partner with the Home Builders Association in all of our key markets,” Sharpe added, “and they have always provided us with an excellent forum for sharing ideas on product designs and finishes.”

Position in the channel

When it comes to driving business in their marketplace, Sharpe feels that this is the one area that is most misunderstood by wholesaler accounts.

“As the market has evolved over the years and products became more and more sophisticated, our manufacturing partners began to ask us, as well as our rep colleagues, to provide more of a pull-through selling environment,” he explained. “While this may sometimes be seen as an infringement on what was traditionally considered the wholesaler’s responsibility, our role is to make certain that contractors and specifiers have an intimate working knowledge of those products that we sell, and that they know that should those products ever fail, our team — in conjunction with those manufacturers we represent as well as our distributor partners — will be providing

the support required to resolve any negative situation.”

Without a doubt, relationships are still a major driver in building customer loyalty in this industry. Woolf-Harris strives to expand on traditional methods of developing relationships to add even greater value to its customers.

“In addition to the old tried-and-true philosophy of spending time with valued accounts over lunch or dinner, we also use our manufacturers’ facilities and their training centers to host events that are memorable to our customers for the learning aspect as well as the social portion,” Sharpe noted. “We believe that one of the very best ways to enhance a personal and business relationship is to develop an environment in which the customer at any level of the distribution chain comes to rely upon our organization for superior service. In short, we like for our customers to hold us to a higher standard.

“Also, we have incorporated a Customer Contact Management piece into our software package that allows us to get to know our customers just a little bit better. Anytime we can use our knowledge of the individual to enhance our relationship, it’s time well spent.”

Value of independent reps

While Sharpe acknowledged that some of the headline-making issues facing businesses today — such as health insurance, fuel costs and the economy — are difficult to navigate, he is also concerned that some manufacturers “do not truly realize that the best value they have in any market environment is the service of a manufacturer’s representative. As independent businesspeople, we shoulder those expenses associated with bringing the product into the market place — and they have become extraordinary over the past few years. Incidentally, when the market is soft and sales decline, so do those revenues earned by the representative.

“We are members and strong supporters of AIM/R and the issue of giving our manufacturers a better understanding of who we are and how we function as agencies has been a hot topic of conversation for the past few years. That said, we invited several manufacturers to participate in this year’s conference event as an Associate Member. If you were not one of those who chose to come perhaps you will consider it next year. You will not be disappointed.”

A classic Southern gentleman, Sharpe graciously closed the interview by saying, “On behalf of all the men and women who are Woolf-Harris Inc., I want to thank *The Wholesaler* and its staff for giving us an opportunity to share with the plumbing industry a little bit about who we are and what we think sets us apart. We would also like to thank those customers and manufacturers that we serve for giving us the chance to do just that.”



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