



Advice for New Owners and Operations Managers Seasoned Contractors Offer Tips They Learned Along the Way

by Paul Scelsi

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Photo courtesy of Roofing Contractor Magazine*

“When your phone rings, answer it.”

“Make sure you have the best people to represent your company.”

“Make good decisions choosing projects.”

These are some of the tips from seasoned residential roofing contractors — many of them in managerial or ownership positions — we collected in a recent survey. The goal was to gather guidance to help someone starting his or her new roofing company or stepping into operational management responsibilities for the first time. In an episode of Air Vent’s podcast, we asked Trevor Atwell, owner of Atwell Exterior Services, Greenville, N.C., to comment on the collected tips and add any pointers from his experience launching his own business.

Tip: “Work hard and buy a building before you think you are ready.”
– Greg Pike, project consultant, Campo Roofing, Twinsburg, Ohio

“You have to work hard. You have to get out there and hustle. I tell everyone that I wake up every day looking for a job, looking for work. I wake up unemployed every day. That’s my mindset,” Atwell says.

Regarding buying a building, although Atwell does not have a building, he says if it’s a goal of yours to have one, making those arrangements sooner rather than later makes sense.

“Go out there and get the tools you need for your business. And if a building is one of them, if a building is one of the tools you need, jump on it,” he says.

Tip: “Use video introductions for prospects. New companies in particular need to form a human connection.” – Max Bumgardner, marketing director and operations manager, Sutton’s Home Improvement, Springfield, Ill.

“Making a human connection is important,” Atwell says. “Making videos and posts on social media is a weakness of mine. I actually prefer face-to-face meetings. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic sometimes those in-person meetings are not possible and yet a human connection is still important. So I agree there needs to be a personal aspect to your introductions.”

Tip: “Make sure you have a proper license and insurance. Make sure you have the best people around you to represent your company. Make good decisions choosing projects. Don’t just settle for a project. Win it. Good roofs are not cheap and cheap roofs are not good.” – Tom Picha, vice president, All in 1 Home Improvements, Oswego, Ill.

“When I first started my business, I reached out to other professionals both in the roofing industry and in other industries asking for their advice. And one of the first things that always came up was to make sure I have any necessary licensing and insurance,” Atwell says. “It was good advice. It took a little trial and error to make sure I did have the things I needed in place. This is great advice for a start-up and absolutely necessary.”

Atwell believes strongly in Picha’s recommendation to surround yourself with the best people.

“Not just employees or subcontractors, but surround yourself with great contacts and representatives from your suppliers, your distributors as well as the various manufacturers you work with,” Atwell says. “I’ve been in this industry for over 30 years now and I have built a long list of contacts. These are all people I surround myself with to gain good advice and to work with on a regular basis. It helps me to do a better job and to run my business better. You also have to find a good accountant; someone you can trust to work with who will support your business as well.”

When Picha cautioned making good decisions choosing projects and that good roofs are not cheap and cheap roofs are not good, Atwell immediately ranked that guidance near the top of his list.

“I agree with it 100%,” he says. “Definitely make good decisions choosing your projects. The projects that you are exposed to, you do not have to choose them. I have chosen to walk away from numerous projects. If it’s not a good fit, if you get a bad feeling about it up front, don’t just settle on it, don’t

just accept work because it's there. That work may not be a good choice for your company. Be selective ensuring you can properly do the work and that it fits your business."

Tip: "Install balanced attic ventilation, evenly spaced intake and exhaust vents. Install intake vents no more than four feet apart otherwise it will create dead spots; the air will not move very well inside the attic if the intake vents are too far apart. Always follow the 1/150 ratio instead of the 1/300: one square foot of net free area airflow for every 150 square feet of attic floor space." – Stan Robinson, owner of Pacific West Roofing, Hubbard, Ore.

"Clearly, Stan Robinson follows best practices and I agree with it and we strive for it always," Atwell says. "Use the tools available to accurately measure the roof pitch and the square footage of the attic which then determines the amount of attic ventilation needed, for example, the Air Vent app. We use that all the time. Just plug in the approximate square footage and it lists the quantity of ventilation needed. We always try to provide balanced intake and exhaust. It's not always possible, but it is our goal and I recommend it."

Tip: "If your phone rings, answer it. Return phone calls. Show up when you say you will."

These tips are from Atwell and they are what triggered his guest appearance on our podcast. As basic as the tips might sound, they separate many companies in the eyes of potential customers, he says.

"These are things we hear all the time from homeowners," Atwell says. "When I started selling roofs I heard these comments daily. Homeowners would thank me when I arrived at the project. They would thank me that I answered my phone or returned their phone call. They would thank me for showing up on time. It was amazing to me how many people did not do this. I found that if I can strive to do these three things, this is a recipe for success. And it has been for me. It has worked."

Atwell realizes things come up and it's not always possible to pick up the ringing phone or to immediately return the call. But he does not ignore the call. He always calls back in a timely manner.

"If a homeowner has reached out to you and is interested in your services and provides you with a way to get back in touch with them, return the call no later than the next day," he says. "And by all means, if you set up an appointment with someone and say you're going to be there at a specific time, show up on time."

He goes on to explain that if something arises that will prevent him from keeping the appointment, he immediately alerts the customer and together they schedule a new appointment.

"Even if you cannot at the moment return the phone call, you can send a text message or an email communicating that you are not ignoring the customer and you'll telephone soon. These basic communication practices have served my company very well. Customers appreciate them and they work," Atwell says.

One thing Atwell will never do and recommends new roofing companies also avoid is showing up unannounced.

“You don’t want to arrive unexpected. You don’t know what the situation is for the homeowner at the house – pets, children – maybe they are not home but wanted to be there when you arrive. Don’t show up unannounced,” Atwell says.

Atwell’s final piece of advice is to do your homework.

“Learn the roofing industry. Don’t think you can just buy a ladder and a hammer, and you can start your own roofing company tomorrow. That’s not how it works,” he says. “There’s a lot of knowledge you need before you can go out and sell roofs, run your business and do it successfully. Ask for advice. Attend educational seminars. Any form of education that you can obtain for this type of business is crucial. Take every opportunity to educate yourself and never stop learning. Learn from other people’s successes and failures within our industry and outside of it. Most people are willing to share their knowledge if you ask. Visit their websites. Learn how they do things day-to-day that helps them stay successful.”

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