



# PDCA Member

## Rusty Signor of Signor Enterprises

By Lindsay Williams

1979 was a very good year indeed. For Rusty Signor, it meant the start of Signor Enterprises in Austin, Texas. With wife Beth Ann by his side, Signor launched his company with the prospect of serving America with marine installations of pilings, boat docks, bulkheads, and driven piling foundations for residential homes and commercial buildings.

“About half of my jobs are driving pilings for large custom homes,” Signor says. “And then the other part we do marine installations. We’re very mobile. We use our mobile barges for drillings, test holes, repairing dams and bridges, geotech analysis and disaster response.” “We’re constantly getting bigger equipment and better equipment. We just bought a new air-driven pile driving machine from Pileco, which we found out at the [PDCA] convention. Our capacity for production has gone up about 40 percent, and that’s been real beneficial.”

Signor is at the top of his game. Yet he would not be there without the aid of his remarkable employees. With about a dozen full-time employees on staff, Signor believes that their talent and reliability is the foundation for his success. “Employees, employees, employees,” Signor says. “They’ll take care of your customers.”

When it comes down to a typical project, Signor makes the initial contact and assumes care of the sales. Then the staff takes over from there. Signor has called himself merely the figurehead for the operations, claiming that the quality of his staff is what decides how the client relations will be handled.

“We get a lot of compliments every month [for the employees]. While receiving a check from any client is gratifying, frequent follow-up compliments from customers always overwhelm me,” he says. The staff of Signor Enterprises tend to become long-term employees, working their way to the top from the bottom-up. Opportunity presents itself so consistently for his employees because Signor chooses to not micro-manage.

Signor used to be on every job, driving the tug boats, operating the tractors and more. However, over time he has come to realize that he gets better development and employees come up through the ranks much faster should he step back a little. “I’m not holding anyone down,” he says. Applying this knowledge to many sites, he’s used value engineering to lower the costs. “Value engineering is probably my biggest forte,” Signor says

On one project Signor is particularly proud of, his company saved a client \$130,000 and resurrected a dead job for an airport hangar though the use of value engineering. Although not an engineer, he has still managed to find different components that are economical.

After a budget for a job at San Marcus Airport was deemed too expensive due to complications associated with expansive clays, old taxiways, and buried concrete left behind by an old hangar that had burned down years before, Signor and his team came back with a cost-saving proposal to drill pilot holes through all of the anomalies and then drove pilings. They accomplished this in three days and managed to pour all of the foundation as flatwork. Instead of a structural foundation, costing \$8.50 a square foot, they did it for \$3.05 a square foot, saving a great deal of money for the customer and rendering the whole project viable. “And we did it expeditiously,” Signor says. “You can save money or take a lot of time, but that’s no good. It’s got to be both [save time and money].”

When asked about the project of which he is most proud, Signor responded, “We built a boat dock that beat out close to 200 architectural entries, including a university, an airport, a country club, and a hotel. I was really tickled about that. The architect told me to do the structure how I wanted to do it and help him with the steel components. Then we had an engineer that sealed it all. I think they won nine national, international, awards for it. That was a really fun, fun project.”

Considering the money and time Signor saved his client, it’s no wonder he doesn’t feel the need to advertise for his



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company. Ninety-eight percent of our work is all referrals, he says. Signor Enterprises relies on a system of vertical operations. They own the equipment, complete of the sales, create the designs and produce the services. Very little is ever subcontracted out.

Therefore, it is in Signor's best interest to be a part of PDCA. As a member of this trade organization for the past four years, Signor attends conventions to keep abreast of technological issues and acquire mentors who dispense vital advice on the first ring of a phone call. Signor says, "I'm very sincere. "If you're in the business it's absolutely stupid not to go [to conventions] to get solutions, to communicate pile driving problems, testing results, and mentoring from highly qualified individuals with pile driving experience.

Many customers commend Signor for his work, but he turns right around and gives all the praise to the PDCA. Upon joining PDCA, Signor breathed a sigh of relief, seeing that people from all over the nation, and the world were running into all the same problems. "People have forgotten how proven piles are and they are relying on drilled piers. And since I've gotten into PDCA, I can think of at least four customers that I was able to convince the structural engineers to change their techniques. I have a customer that we saved \$30,000 on, another customer that we saved \$130,000 on and another customer that called me and said, "Rusty, I have wasted time and \$10,000 in engineering fees because these people kept saying 'drill piers, drill piers,' and I can't believe I didn't find you until now," and I am so tickled about this. All of these are the result of the information and education I've gotten from the PDCA."

When asked about the major benefits to using driven piles Signor responded, "...We can look at the inside of the pile [to confirm the] integrity of the pile. It just takes all those anomalies out of the equation." He considers one of his greatest challenges educating the engineering profession "about the advantages of piles and trying to get rid of any of the preconceptions that have lingered for years about pilings. For instance, about how noisy they are, how much they vibrate, how costly they are. These are all preconceptions that are erroneous."

When it comes to safety, Signor understands the need for the best trained employees. This is why Signor Enterprises employees take OSHA safety courses every two years and have safety meetings every week. "Insurance is a major problem and so safety is the safety net for that," Signor says.

Signor stressed quality control and process improvement as an important aspect of the job. "All of our equipment and personnel are trained and certified in everything they do. We keep up on the latest technology, information, and bulletins. Every job that I've worked on has had an architect and an engineer. The engineer monitors our job and certifies our job at the end. And that probably is the biggest learning process for me, because to listen to every engineer on every job, you can't help but pick up things."

Signor and his wife Beth Ann have three children, Jason, Celeste, and Clayton and a Granddaughter, Libby. His volunteer interests are the Boy Scouts; he serves as chaplain for a juvenile institution and he teaches writing clinics to a Christian youth organization, Adventures Unlimited. ▼

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