

# MILWAUKEE BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Building an engineering firm on ethics, trust: Rick Smith

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Rick Smith has toyed with the idea of opening another office for his firm in Florida and perhaps building a second home there, away from Milwaukee.

As president of an engineering firm that has worked in nearly every state, Smith has the ability to choose a city, open a branch office and move from southeastern Wisconsin. But he continues to opt against it, and not just because he's not a big fan of travel.

"I love Milwaukee, as much as it has been maligned in the news due to a lot of negative issues," Smith said. "It's like everything else in life. People look at the grass on the other side of the fence being greener, but one thing I learned early in my career is we are all human beings in that we have similar problems. I would rather stay and invest in making our community more vibrant and successful than relocate to somewhere else."

While staying home, Smith keeps active. He has been on the board of the Public Policy Forum research organization for 15 years and has served as president of the Xaverian Missionaries group, based in Franklin, for an equal time. He's created a minor local celebrity as the "jump-around guy" at Marquette University men's basketball games, and volunteers frequently at his alma mater.

"I'm a firm believer of providing your feedback and your talent back to the community that gave you the opportunity to develop your career," Smith said.

Stan Jaskolski, retired Opus Dean of the College of Engineering at Marquette University, remembers working with Smith to organize conferences about the water economy in Milwaukee. Those drew hundreds of public and private-sector officials and predated The Water Council.

"I'll never forget Rick standing up at our very first meeting and almost prophetically presenting an off-the-cuff presentation of how important this is," Jaskolski said. "Rick is a genius in developing contacts and interacting with those contacts to get something started."

Meanwhile, Smith's firm, R.A. Smith National Inc., plays a role in several notable projects. It is doing engineering work for the Green Bay Packers' \$130 million Titledown District, construction of more than 700 housing units in the Westlawn public housing campus in Milwaukee, and did construction staking for the Milwaukee Bucks' downtown parking structure.

With almost 200 workers, R.A. Smith in Brookfield is a far cry from the 10-person operation Smith founded in 1978. Smith's after-hours nowadays are



SCOTT PAULUS

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spent networking and volunteering, but back then he was more likely attending evening city council meetings to discuss wastewater treatment plants or other municipal projects.

Smith started the business after buying out the engineering firm where he was working at age 28. After buying the firm, he started reaching out to ex-clients and realized its reputation wasn't as stellar as he had assumed. Smith learned some core principles thanks to challenges he faced at that time.

He renamed the firm. To build up the new name, Smith took projects on a handshake and negotiated fees with clients only after the work was done and they were satisfied.

"One thing I always tell people is wealth comes and goes, but the one thing nobody can take from you is your reputation," Smith said. "You are in control, solely in control, of how you act, how you appear, what you say and how you follow up. You are in control of your reputation. Your strongest asset in life is how people can trust you."

Although seemingly prepared to teach a course on business ethics or management, Smith remains an engineer, with an engineer's inquiring mind. Years ago, he pushed the state to consider electronically controlled express lanes on the Highway 59 bypass around Waukesha, but was rejected for today's existing, more traditional highway.

Nowadays, Smith studies new construction and design methods, and challenges his employees to craft multiple approaches, not just one solution, when working on projects.

"It's not how to design the project using traditional means, but to always come up with options and alternative designs and be able to challenge not only ourselves, but to provide options," Smith said. "There are so many new things coming up and being developed, like the whole world with technology, and it has just given us more tools and more room to experiment."

### ► CLOSER LOOK

## RICK SMITH

**Title:** President

**Company:** R.A. Smith National Inc., Brookfield

**Family:** Wife, Joan; children, Ricky, Bobby and Bridget

**Education:** Master's and bachelor's degrees in civil engineering from Marquette University

**Age:** 66

**Resides:** Elm Grove

**Best decision:** "One of my best business decisions was the acquisition of National Survey & Engineering in 1994. This acquisition enabled us to diversify by significantly increasing our work in the private sector and becoming one of the largest survey companies in the state of Wisconsin and the Midwest."

**Toughest decision:** "Reacting to the downturn of the Great Recession has been my toughest decision. Lessons learned include the need to diversify and look at efficiencies, resulting in a company that today is more diversified and profitable than before the recession."

**Like best about your job:** "I enjoy solving problems using innovative solutions and new technology, as well as providing our employees with meaningful career opportunities. Working toward excellence is never ending."

**Most important lesson learned:** "Never take anything for granted and always be honest, work your hardest and treat people the way you want to be treated. Winston Churchill stated it best, 'Never, never, never give up.'"

**Pastimes:** Golf, swimming, biking, running and yoga

**First car:** 1958 Chevrolet Bel Air

**Favorite tie:** "My Marquette University tie"

**Last book read:** "The Swamp" by Michael Grunwald