



Lima Co.: A Philly Success Story

Surviving two recessions, the plumbing and HVAC contractor turned its expertise to solving a condo building's circulator pump problem.

[Dan Vastyan](#)

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During the mid-'70s, our country was in the throes of a significant recession. While most firms were running scared and recoiling their resources, a fellow by the name of Bill Gates embarked on his dream — a company he named Microsoft. Most people know of his success story.

A lesser-known success story began during that same recession. Bob Lima embarked on his dream — Philadelphia-based Lima Co.

The parallels between these two businessmen are multi-pronged. They noticed a need in the marketplace for their product/service, they believed in their abilities to develop their mission, and they had the foresight to launch their dreams during a deep recession.

Fast-forward to 2008: Lima Co. found itself amid another recession. It saw its clients shrinking, merging and deferring facility maintenance and capital replacement projects. Lima Co.'s revenue fell 30 percent.

This type of decline forces some hard decisions. Should Lima managers retract its business after 32 years of steady growth or gear up for the future? It could retract the business by scaling back payrolls, cutting marketing budgets, decreasing general overhead expenses and reducing pricing in an attempt to secure more business — but company leaders knew it to be the wrong direction.

"When 2008 hit, we decided to double down on the team we'd built," said Bob Lima, founder and president. "We kept all our employees, increased marketing budgets, expanded our Client Care Team and increased our service offerings. We have great people and they're our greatest asset. Cutting team members was not the right thing to do."

Today, Lima Co. employs 71 people including technicians, client care specialists, service coordinators, engineers and support teams. The average team member has been with the company for more than 16 years, some with tenure of more than 30 years. The company culture is one of caring and respect for all. The core thread running through the whole company is the willingness to serve each other.

"Client care in our country is weak at best," says Bob Adams, vice president of sales and marketing. "We aim to change this. Meeting our clients'

expectations is the only thing that matters. You must know what those expectations are; you uncover it by actively listening to your client. Your client will tell you all you need to know to be successful.”

He adds: “Treating clients as we want to be treated isn’t a groundbreaking concept. We work to the best of our ability. In our business — which is 95 percent commercial service — that takes flexibility, a broad knowledge base and vendors you can lean on.”

Hospitality to multifamily

In 2016, Lima Co. won the HVAC and plumbing service contracts for Grandview Condominiums in Center City Philadelphia. With it, the contractor inherited several mechanical issues ranging from minor to massive. The property owners were looking to make significant improvements to the systems that served the building, as well as reduce its energy consumption.

“We’ve handled several plumbing projects and replaced a few water-source heat pumps,” notes John Shoemaker, Lima Co.’s HVAC manager. “But the larger projects included replacing two 18-section cast-iron boilers, installing a new building control system and fixing a variety of issues on the building’s two-cell cooling tower. These projects carry a good ROI and prove that management is serious about making the correct improvements.”

The 17-story, 200-unit condo building was transformed from a Holiday Inn hotel about 15 years ago. This conversion inevitably created a shift in some of the buildings’ energy loads, usage patterns and mechanical system demands.

“We came into the picture years after the renovation, but there were still plenty of kinks to work out within the building,” Shoemaker says. “Not the least of which was the domestic hot water recirculation system.”

Adapting to a new load

Two high-efficiency volume water heaters provided domestic hot water to a 900-gallon storage tank, and hot water was circulated throughout the building via a two-inch insulated line and a five-horsepower (460/3/60), fixed-speed circulator.

Sometime after Lima Co. was awarded the maintenance contracts, the circulator failed. An emergency service call ensued and Lima technicians exchanged the large pump for an identical new one — a spare already on a shelf in the mechanical room. Problem solved, for the time being. The fact that an extra pump of that size was kept on hand by maintenance crews was a red flag. So were the two similar failed pumps laying discarded on a shelf.

Researching the situation further, Shoemaker uncovered the rest of the story. Water hammer was a problem in various parts of the building. The pump’s breaker would often trip overnight, and the domestic hot water system had destroyed several circulators since the building was converted to condominiums.

“We typically take our pump questions to B.J. Terroni, the local Taco Comfort Solutions rep,” Shoemaker explains. “Paul Silvestre came right out to the job and helped us as he always does.”

Silvestre asked questions of the Lima technicians and building maintenance staff to better understand the situation. After learning the building’s history, the full picture came into view.

“There used to be a commercial kitchen and full-service laundry when this was a hotel,” Silvestre explains. “The water hammer is an indication of too much pressure. The breaker trips overnight when there’s little or no demand for hot water, and the pumps were failing because they were constantly over amping. When the building was converted, the domestic hot water load dropped and the pump size never did. With an oversized, fixed speed circulator, it’s a big problem.”

The in-line pumps previously used provided roughly 50 gallons/minute at 190 feet/head. Silvestre worked with Joe Mattiello, Northeast regional sales manager of commercial products at Taco, to calculate a new pump curve based on the current requirements of the building.

“The issue was repeated cavitation within the pump,” Mattiello says. “Excessive flow rate caused the pump to overheat, resulting in pump failure about every other year. Using a properly-sized, variable-speed circulator would solve everything.”

Silvestre and Mattiello found Taco’s new 1915e light commercial ECM circulator was a good fit. It provides a peak flow rate of 120 gpm and a maximum of 65 feet/head. More importantly, the 650-watt circulator is variable speed. Overnight, or during the workday when demand for domestic hot water is low, the pump throttles to match the system’s curve.

Lima Co. installed a stainless-steel model, which is certified to NSF/ANSI Standards 61 and 372 for potable water systems. Simple building management system integration is achieved via 0-10v capability and the ECM motor offers up to 85 percent energy savings over a conventional circulator.

“We re-piped the domestic hot water loop in the mechanical room,” Shoemaker notes. “The old pump was very large. The new one is a fraction of the size, so we were able to save some space. There are nine operating modes on this pump, but we’ve had it in ‘proportional pressure’ mode since day one. There hasn’t been a single call here for months; compare that with two per week in the past.”

Four decades of service

The solution Lima Co. provided for Grandview Condominiums is indicative of the service the contractor strives to provide for all its clients. It gives 100-percent effort from everyone within the company. When other perspectives are needed, they call upon the expertise of industry professionals

outside the company.

"We've been dealing with both B.J. Terroni and Taco since the beginning," Lima says. "Starting in 1976, Terroni was one of the reps that taught us the industry. Its in-house knowledge is second to none and it specs the products right for the job – not what it wants or has to sell. We go to Terroni for its people and their expertise, and that's how I want our customers to view Lima Co."

He adds that the business has dealt with the same manufacturer's representatives, wholesalers and manufacturers since it began in 1976. "Our employees and our vendors are the reason we're still here, through good times and bad," he notes. "I wish I'd be here to see what Lima Co. can accomplish in the next 42 years."

