

Compass International: Quality fasteners backed by personalized service

Decades before “global marketplace” was a business buzz-phrase, Ron Farrell was traveling overseas to seek better buying opportunities for his business. However, Farrell found more than just quality products and prices. He also discovered a business model that launched a new company and a second career.

“I first went to the Orient in 1973 to buy for a predecessor company that I owned at the time,” Farrell said. “But I ended up seeing such huge business opportunities that I started Compass International to bring quality fasteners to the U.S.A. from Asian factories.”

Thirty-five years later, Compass International is still growing. It has become one of the country’s major suppliers of drywall screws and other construction fasteners. Headquartered in Fullerton, Calif., the company’s primary brands are Marker (drywall and multipurpose screws) and Darts (self-drilling fasteners).

Meanwhile, Farrell’s second career continues. After recently celebrating his 80th birthday, he jokes that he is the “oldest owner” in the industry. He is still active in Compass; he even has a toll-free number that dials his California-based house directly. Farrell says he’s often awakened at 6:30 a.m. with sales calls from East Coast business associates. But he doesn’t mind.

Farrell prefers the personal atmosphere of this privately owned company, and he sees it as a competitive advantage.

“We’re smaller and highly trained, which allows us to get a little bit closer to the customer. I’m the president and CEO, but anyone can call me,” Farrell said.



Personalized service, trained expertise

Providing customers with personal service is a cornerstone of the company.

“We want our customers to know that our staff can provide them with immediate personalized service and training on everything, including filling the order, going on joint sales calls at job sites, and providing assistance with the actual application of fasteners,” said Connie Swatek, vice president of sales.

Compass supports these efforts through its training center, located at its headquarters.

“Our employees are highly trained,” said Farrell. “We bring our employees to our training lab, where they learn how to install the product, what parts to recommend, as well as solutions to fastening problems,” said Farrell.

All of Compass’s salespeople receive hands-on training at the facility during their first 60 to 90 days. Employees become comfortable working with

screws and fastener applications, so they can provide excellent service to their distributor customers.

Quality control

Compass also puts a great emphasis on quality. It has an in-house engineer and a quality control lab where orders are tested to ensure quality.

“One of the things we strive to do better than anyone else is test the product,” said Farrell. “We have a test lab at our headquarters that is head and shoulders above any of our competitors. It’s an advanced test lab for all of our products—and every order is tested before it is shipped.”

The company’s lab also serves as a pathway to innovation, said Swatek. Customers often come to Compass with special requests. The company can develop solutions to fit customers’ needs.

“Research and development is a big part of who we are,” said Swatek. “We’re always researching new applications for special orders. We keep up

with the latest innovations and products. We're constantly bringing in new fasteners in different sizes or different lengths or for new purposes."

A focused approach

In addition to ensuring quality and expertise, Compass employs a highly focused approach to product selection and distribution.

"We're focused on fasteners. We don't sell other product lines, so we think we're experts," Farrell said. "We can offer our customers training and expertise on fastener applications in the field, as well as any specialized training or sales tools they might need."

The company applies the same focused approach to distribution.

"We sell to distributors only," Farrell said. "That's how we first got connected with AMAROK, because we were committed to the distribution channel. With warehouses strategically located throughout the U.S., we can quickly deliver needed inventory to the clientele of AMAROK." That kind of just-in-time delivery helps members save money by reducing their need to keep large quantities of product in stock.

Compass has been with AMAROK since the beginning—one of the group's original vendors. With the current economy, Swatek said that Compass has been helping AMAROK members transition from residential to commercial applications through specialized training.

"AMAROK has been a solid fit for us," Farrell said. "We appreciate the resources and networking that AMAROK provides. But the biggest benefit we get from being an AMAROK preferred vendor is great customers. We receive enhanced sales and great relationships with AMAROK distributors, and that's why we've been with AMAROK since the beginning."

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As we go to press, Compass International was acquired by PrimeSource Building Products.

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