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Contractor Close-Up

Tony Hunter, Evenflow Mechanical

Tony Hunter sits behind his desk at Evenflow Mechanical, located at 1861 W. Lomita Blvd., unit C, Lomita, Calif. The company sign was only recently put on the street-side marquee. He's been at the site for just over a year. Before that he'd been working out of his garage.

"I quit my job in Aug. 2004," Hunter says. He bought a used van from Enterprise and "just crossed my fingers." But it isn't luck that makes this HVAC startup a success.

For 12 years Hunter worked for a large plumbing and heating company in Los Angeles. "The owner was generous enough to give me the freedom to learn on his time," Hunter says. "I have a lot of gratitude for that."

Back in 1997, Hunter got his contractor's license. "I realized I was worth more than I was being paid, not to fault my former boss," he acknowledges. "It's just business." But before taking off on his own, he knew that he needed to mature and get a business plan. "It's like building a house," he says, "you got to lay a foundation."

Whether consciously or not, Hunter's boss at the plumbing and heating company gave him a lot of encouragement. "He'd tell me I could probably start my own business and make it a success with my work ethic," he says. "That meant a lot to me." Hunter began carrying a notebook everywhere he went and jotting down ideas as they came to him.

He started Evenflow out of his garage on a shoestring budget. Planning is important, but luck was also helpful for Hunter. "A neighbor friend of mine owns a plumbing and heating business, which within months of me starting my own business lost its heating and air conditioning guy," he says. "She had

no place to put a lot of the calls and called me asking if she could give them to me. Absolutely, I said."

Evenflow, which is both a homage to one of Hunter's favorite bands, Pearl Jam, and based on customers' common complaint of an uneven flow of air conditioning through their houses, has been steadily growing over its few years in existence. Currently, the operation has one truck and a two-man crew: Victor Soto, lead, and apprentice Tim Gonzales. Hunter has also recently hired a service manager, Stephanie Harlow. By the end of the year Hunter plans to hire on another crew of three and buy or lease two more trucks.

"Within the next month or two," he says, "I want to get into charge verification and duct testing." Hunter stresses the importance of keeping abreast of what's happening in the industry. He takes training classes given by the Institute of Heating and Air Conditioning Industries (IHACI) and The Gas Company for NATE and reads *Indoor Comfort News*.

"I know that NATE is running a commercial now," he says. "That's going to be huge. I know some guys out there that think that NATE is going to come and go. They don't want to deal with it. I am NATE certified. It's going to be a requirement for my guys. I would encourage other contractors to get involved in NATE."

With NATE and Title 24, Hunter sees opportunity for contractors. "It's allowing the business to expand," he says. "Southern California Edison is giving incentives to contractors. They're free to do whatever they want with them, reinvest in the company or give the customer a refund."

The incentive for Hunter to move out of his garage and into his own site was due to encouragement from Penny Yonan at US Airconditioning Distributors, who was his Carrier and Bryant products representative. "She said there was an opening in the advertising-dealership program," he says. "The only thing was I had to have my own store."

For Hunter the positives of

such a relationship were obvious. "It makes me feel as if I'm part of something bigger," he says. Plus, he gets his own website, www.evenflowmechanical.com, and has worked long with the brands and trusts them.

Hunter has only just begun his entrepreneurial journey, but he knows there's still a long way to go. "When I first started out I saw bad work and I thought it was OK because I didn't know

any better," he says.

"Now I think there's a lot of companies out there that are conscious of putting in a good product and, with Title 24, informing the homeowners how much better it is to be efficient," he says. "I think contractors have to bring a certain amount of integrity back to our trade, especially in the residential area."



Above, Tony Hunter, owner of Evenflow Mechanical, at his desk. Below, Hunter, left, with his crew: Victor Soto, center, and Tim Gonzales, right.

