



True Blue

Professionalism, employee retention, and “Ruston Blue” leave a positive impression on Ruston Paving’s customers

By Allan Heydorn

Any good business is all about building relationships,” says Mark Ruston, third-generation president of Ruston Paving. “If you’re not customer focused, if they see you and your work as a commodity, then there’s no reason to select you over your competitor. We try to understand our customers and try to give them what they want within what we’re equipped to do. If they need anything related to asphalt paving, we can take care of it.”

That’s the essence of Ruston Paving’s approach to its steadily expanding marketplace, and it’s an essence that underlies the way the business runs and the approach the company takes. From the people who represent the contractor in the field to its better-than 90% employee retention rate, Ruston Paving has made its name by keeping its customers at the forefront of its efforts.

Started in 1943 in Syracuse by Mike Ruston, Mark Ruston’s grandfather, Ruston Paving focuses on paving and repair work on commercial and industrial properties. Mike Ruston founded the company on residential paving and repair work, but the focus on commercial work evolved during

the second generation when Mark’s father, Larry, assumed control. By the 1990s almost all work was for commercial customers.

The company expanded to Rochester, NY, in the early 1990s, and when Mark pursued his MBA degree at the University of North Carolina he guided growth into the South, initially bidding work and scheduling New York crews to work two-week stints in North Carolina.

In 1999 Ruston Paving set up shop in the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill area referred to as The Triangle, which has a high concentration of business-to-business industry and a lot of commercial parking areas. Soon after that Ruston used its Syracuse-to-Rochester expansion plan and expanded from The Triangle into the Triad Area of Winston-Salem/Greensboro/High Point.

Today the company employs more than 125 people during peak season, 80% of those working in the field.

“We’re interested in projects where most of the work involves asphalt paving,” Ruston says. “We’re geared up for higher production paving but we won’t turn down a commercial client for any size repair.”

A positive impression

Ruston Paving works to make a good impression in its marketplace, and that begins with the way it approaches its customers. First of all, Ruston Paving has no salespeople.

“We never have,” Ruston says.

Instead the contractor puts responsibility of each job in the hands of a project manager, who functions as both estimator and job manager. Don Barry, director of corporate development, says the project managers are “the point man on the job from start to finish.

“When a call comes in, the project manager meets with the customer, speaks with the owner, visits the property, then puts the quote together. If we get awarded the job he gets the information to the foreman and checks on the job while it’s being done,” Barry says. “He gets a feel for what the customer is looking for and relays that information to the foreman so that the customer gets what he wants.”

Ruston says the company’s project management team all have technical backgrounds in civil engineering, landscape architecture, or construction management.

“One of the things that sets us apart from our competition is the professionalism of our management staff, which makes a very positive impression of our company on our customer,” Ruston says. “When we send people who are well educated, with good industry



“We market ourselves as doing both new construction and pavement repair,” says Mark Ruston, president of Ruston Paving. “Some people think we’re too big and they don’t call us because they think we don’t handle smaller jobs. But we handle it all. We have no trouble taking any work that involves paving, repair, or patching.”



Ruston Paving offers site preparation, asphalt paving and repair, pavement rehabilitation, pothole repair, full-depth repair, and some sealcoating and crackfilling.

backgrounds to meet with a customer it says a lot about our company right from the get-go. That gives us a good foundation to be able to speak to a customer's needs on an intelligent level. Most people on the management team have a good amount of field experience, too, which enables us to communicate better with the customer because we know and understand what's going to happen out there on the job."

Ruston relies on this project manager/sales approach because it helps develop relationships with customers.

"We like to develop relationships with all our vendors and our suppliers for the long term and we like to do the same with our customers," Barry says. "A project manager who has worked with a customer on a previous job knows the ins and outs of that customer, why things are the way they are, and any unique aspects about a job or customer. It makes the whole process go smoothly on both ends."

Ruston Paving also does not have an accounts receivables department to call customers if a bill's not paid.

"The project manager does that because he has been involved with the customer and the job throughout the job and has a better grasp of what has happened," Barry says.

Ruston says each project manager approaches each job differently, eschewing a "one size fits all" formula for customer service.

"Every customer is different and you have to treat them differently," Ruston says. "For new construction we're often acting as a sub-contractor and our customer is the general contractor. But on rehab work we're working for the property owner so the approach is very different."

Retaining employees speeds growth

A crucial aspect of Ruston Paving's ability to expand so quickly and successfully into four markets over 10 years is its approach to its employees, particularly field employees.

"Our ability to retain our field employees and the skill level of our field employees allows us to be very productive, which enables us to

remain competitive in each of our markets," Ruston says.

Ruston retains employees "because we pay them well," Ruston says. "We don't chase employees with dollars but we do pay them well."

Ongoing training, including in-house pre-season paving and grading seminars, Blaw-Knox schools, weekly Toolbox Talks, and defensive driving classes play a role in retention, as do bonuses. Drivers receive monetary bonuses based on hours driven if they make it through the year without any accidents, and employees receive gift certificates if they work the year without any lost time due to injuries.

Included in all its programs is an emphasis on "positive attitude," and employees even view a video program, which is reinforced through discussion afterwards.

"We try to emphasize that their attitude, especially on the job and with customers, is very important because you can bid a job and be awarded the work, but all it takes is an employee or a crew to sour that relationship with the customer, which we have worked hard to establish," Ruston says. "So we try to make sure our employees understand how important they are to us and to our relationship with our customers. They are salesmen for the company just as much as anybody else — probably even more so."

Ruston says one of the company's goals is to break down any division between the office and the field.

"And we're pretty successful at doing that," he says. "It's very evident from the carpets in our offices."

In addition to hands-on field participation from project managers, who make frequent visits to each job, Ruston hosts company events — picnics, parties, and group training — to bring office and field personnel together.

But before Ruston can bring employees together it has to find them. In addition to standard hiring efforts, the contractor has successfully relied on an employment link on the company's website and has hosted its own open houses as job fairs.

"We market them as job fairs so the people that visit are looking for work," he says. "We hold them in the off season so all our management is there and it gives them an opportunity to mingle and talk with prospective employees. Those have been very successful."

And then there's the baby blue.

"We are so prominent out there, so visible with the color of our trucks and equipment (internally referred to as "Ruston Blue") that we get calls all the time," he says.

"Ruston Blue" leads marketing effort

Ruston Paving makes a strong marketing effort, beginning with the highly recognizable blue equipment.

"We're very visible out on the streets with our Ruston Blue trucks and equipment. Now it's a conscious effort to maintain that image but it didn't start out that way."

Ruston credits his father with the high-impact baby blue motif. At some point his father bought a used 10-wheel dump truck at a municipal auction and it happened to be pale blue. The next year Ruston Paving bought a red truck at an auction.

"My father thought they should be the same color," Ruston says. "Other trucks in the market were red so we painted the red truck blue."

Today all of Ruston Paving's equipment is painted Ruston Blue.

"We try not to put a piece of equipment on the job until it's been painted Ruston Blue," he says.



President Mark Ruston says the company seeks jobs where most of the work involves asphalt paving. "We're geared up for higher production paving but we won't turn down a commercial client for any size repair," he says.

The company's marketing department also runs a strong direct-mail program, compiling lists and mailing as many as 10,000 marketing pieces in each market three times a year, to capitalize on what Ruston says is a "fairly strong Yellow Pages presence."

"The direct-mail piece, supported by the Yellow Pages ad featuring the blue equipment and our color logo, combined with the fact that they've probably seen our equipment on the job — we think it has a strong impact and makes a strong statement to the customer," Ruston says. ■

Reprinted with permission from *Pavement*, June/July 2004.

