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New York STATE OF MIND

Strict commitments to organization and quality service have transformed RBR/Melville Snow Contractors into an East Coast powerhouse.

RBR/Melville President Bob Wesolowski

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NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

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Anyone can push snow. Bob Wesolowski is up front with his customers about this simple truth. He wants clients to understand this fact because then they appreciate what his company, RBR/Melville Snow Contractors, brings to the table. "If price is all you shop for, well, you get what you paid for," Wesolowski says. "Anyone can push snow, but we offer a well-managed company. That's our edge."

The "edge" Wesolowski speaks of is a hybrid of old-world apprenticeship combined with cutting-edge technology and a strict adherence to organization, all of which has made Islandia, N.Y.-based RBR/Melville the largest privately owned commercial snow contractor in the Metro New York area and one of the largest on the East Coast.

Today, Wesolowski, 58, with retirement on the horizon, has positioned his firm for continued but controlled growth. Expansion, according to the company's conservative management philosophy, will not compromise the foundation RBR/Melville carefully built with three decades of success, that every action they take provides better service for their clients.

"We have two rules," says Pat Feehan, RBR/Melville's sales and marketing manager. "One: The customer is always right. Two: See rule one."

A LITTLE EXTRA INCOME

For the last 30 years, snow has been Bob Wesolowski's life.

Wesolowski was a 27-year-old New York City Police patrolman in 1974 when he first entered the snow removal industry to generate a little extra income.

Wesolowski established RBR, the moniker adopted from the name already stenciled on his first truck, in the basement and garage of his Long Island home. And with the assistance of a couple of neighborhood kids, each with their own plow set-up, he set out to service local

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CORPORATE PROFILE:

RBR/MELVILLE SNOW CONTRACTORS INC.

FOUNDED: 1974 (1986 under current name)

PRESIDENT: Robert Wesolowski

KEY PERSONNEL: Michael Wesolowski, vice president; Carrie Beekman, executive secretary; Pat Feehan, sales and marketing manager.

HEADQUARTERS: Islandia, N.Y., about 30 miles east of New York City.

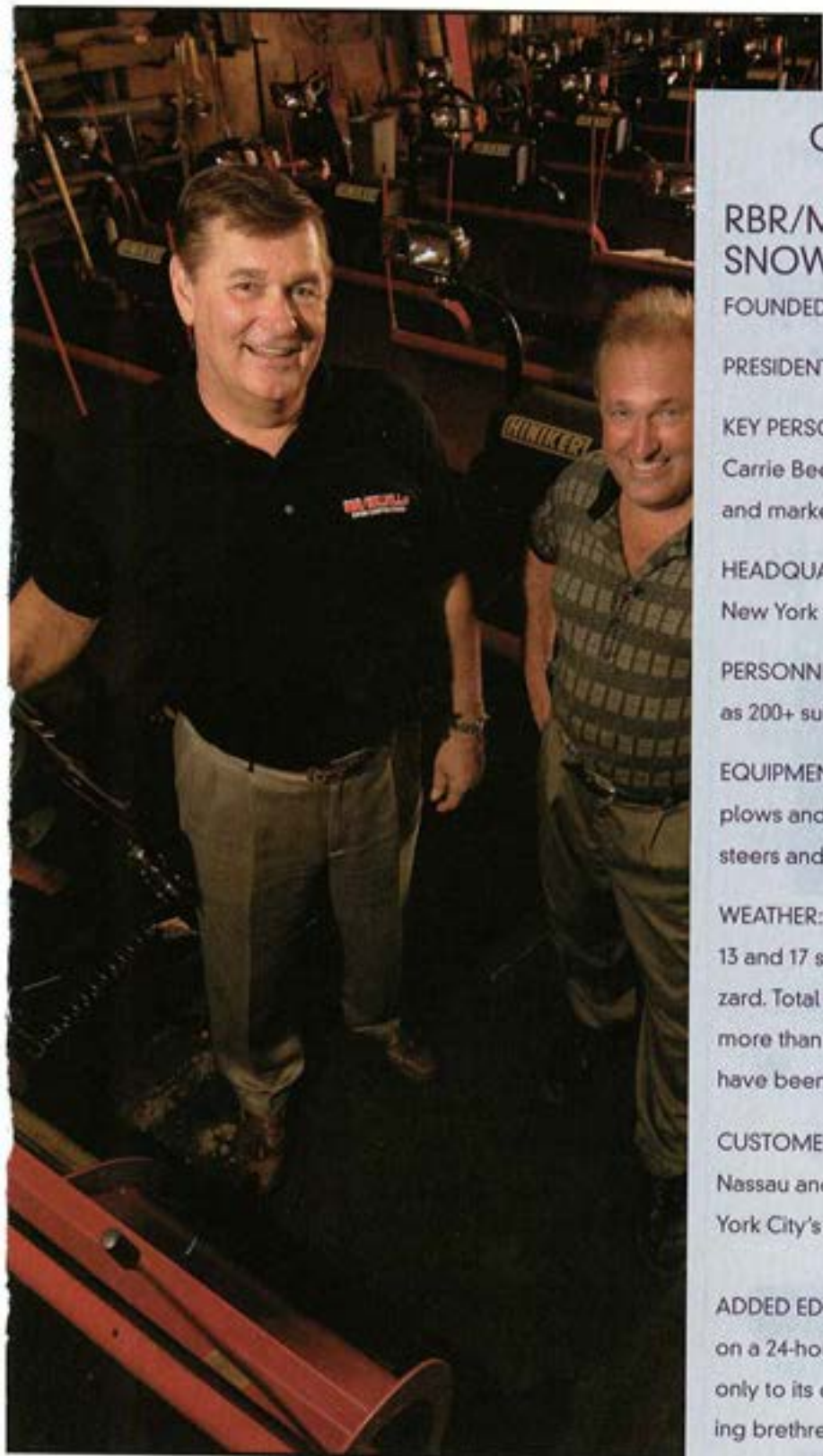
PERSONNEL: 15 full-time, 40 to 70 seasonal and as many as 200+ subcontractors.

EQUIPMENT: 16 plow trucks, 11 six-wheel dumps with plows and spreaders, nine front end loaders, eight skid steers and several other pieces of related equipment.

WEATHER: Each of the last three years produced between 13 and 17 snow events with at least one significant blizzard. Total snowfall during each of those years totaled more than 40-inches of snow when the average should have been about 20 inches.

CUSTOMER BASE: 300 commercial accounts that cover Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island and New York City's five boroughs.

ADDED EDGE: Its full-service maintenance shop operates on a 24-hour basis during snow events and caters not only to its own snow fleet, but also to its snow contracting brethren, including competitors.



Bob and Michael Wesolowski



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COVER STORY

CONTRACTOR'S QUICK TIP

"Be cognizant of the expectations of your customers. Only promise what you can deliver. Often, smaller contractors take on customers that, in major snow events, they do not have the proper equipment to handle."

-Bob Wesolowski

commercial properties.

"It'd drive my wife crazy because the phones would ring all night long when it stormed," Wesolowski says, adding an injury forced him into early retirement from the NYPD in 1978.

With three trucks equipped with sanders, as well as a pick up and a six wheeler, Wesolowski began to make a name for RBR. Long Island's record winter snows during 1977 and 1978 cemented RBR's reputation in the community. Wesolowski's snow operation outperformed the competition during those heavy snowfalls, nearly 20 inches of powder in the '77 storm and nearly 30 inches in the '78 snow storm. His performance earned him the credentials to emerge from a small "mom and pop" business into a major commercial snow contractor.

By 1985, the company was growing at about 20 percent a year. Wesolowski owned 30 pieces of equipment and the company had grown to include six full-time employees and as many as 90 subcontractors. But to take the business to the next level, Wesolowski had to force a major growth spurt.

Open to the idea of a merger, Wesolowski bought out his largest competitor, strategically located in an area he wanted to get into, and renamed this new addition Melville, after the region where a large percentage of the jobs were located. At the time, he took on two additional partners, one a former partner from the NYPD and the other a long-time friend, into the business to serve as supervisors in this new Western territory.

"I was looking to both expand and to solidify our place in the market," he says. "To expand we had to go west because that's where the big (commercial) development was taking place."

This strategic move increased the business' operations by more than a third, nearly doubled the revenue and allowed the firm to expand its reach into Nassau County and Queens, which was necessary to land large retail contracts.

"Many of the bigger [retail] customers, at that time, wouldn't talk to you unless you could bid to do the job at all of their stores (in the area)," he says.

In addition to the turf, the acquisition allowed him to defer some of his snow insurance costs, which gave the business additional buying power and expanded his network of sand/salt

COVER STORY

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put into service at a major facility so they can be watched and directed on removing snow the RBR/Melville way. This system ensures every site attended to by any RBR/Melville operator is cleared to a certain acceptable level of quality control. And Wesolowski, along with other RBR/Melville supervisors, see to that by random site checks during a snow event.

But there's another quality-control mechanism in the system. Salt-sand guys, who arrive after a site is cleared, are advised not to tend to an improperly cleaned property.

"If a (salt-sand) guy sees that a job hasn't been done right they will not sand," Wesolowski says. "Instead, they're instructed to call me and we have the subcontractor go back and do

the job right. We'll only sand that site after it's been done right."

ACCOUNTABILITY

Wesolowski is done playing games. The days of absentee plow guys are over.

RBR/Melville had operated on the honor system. An employee or subcontractor was taken on his word as to time, place and actions during a snow event. "But I've been burnt too many times," Wesolowski says. "Especially when I wasn't able to find guys and sites weren't being cleaned five to six hours into a storm."

"The integrity of the company is an important extension of this company," Feehan says. "It's a poor reflection on us if one of our contractors doesn't perform well."

This is the first year RBR/Melville has made it mandatory that everyone carry a cell phone, and they have even offered to buy them for workers. Now, there is no excuse for being unable to communicate during critical points of a snow event.

"We're just not going to put up with the nonsense anymore," Wesolowski says. "We pay our men well, and we expect a good job out of them."

Furthermore, RBR/Melville spent the off-season equipping its fleet with GPS to track crews during storms. The investment—about \$2,000 per vehicle—will improve organization and ensure crews are working client sites. "I simply got fed up," Wesolowski says. "I'm supposed to be out checking job sites, not chasing down subcontractors."

The GPS system is at the heart of RBR/

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COVER STORY

Melville's command center, a state-of-the-art dispatch facility linking all of the snow operations to a central point. With a single glance at a pair of gigantic color monitors, everyone working a storm can be located. Afterwards, the electronic tracking system serves as a digital record of where and when plow drivers tended properties. Likewise, the GPS gives RBR/Melville and its subcontractors the convenience of attaining vehicles prior to a snow event.

"Now, the drivers can come the night before a storm, get their truck and be dispatched directly from their homes," Feehan says. "And we can remain confident that our trucks didn't go anywhere they're not supposed to prior to the storm."

In addition to the added convenience, the GPS units serve as security devices. If an unauthorized person starts the vehicles, and alarm alerts RBR/Melville's command center. "With a push of a button we can shut that vehicle down and wait for the cops to go pick it up for us," Wesolowski says.

The GPS network will serve as a sales tool, too. Next sales season, RBR/Melville will use it in their marketing materials to promote their efficiency and accountability.

THE FUTURE

For right now, Wesolowski is satisfied with the size and scope of RBR/Melville's snow operations.

"I don't want to grow into something that ruins the name," he says, adding there's enough untapped business still out there in the five boroughs and Nassau and Suffolk counties he could triple his workload and not make a dent. The firm is also experimenting with adding landscape services for clients who wish to have a single, year-round provider of maintenance services.

Still, Wesolowski feels he's close to semi retirement. He'd like to devote more time to his wife, Mary Ann West, and her career as a professional country singer, his passion for flying and spending time at his 200-acre farm in upstate New York.

And while he's approached now and then by suitors who would like to purchase RBR/Melville, Wesolowski says that's not the future he envisions for his company.

"This started as a family business and I'd like to keep it that way," he says. ■

GETTING WHAT IS OWED

Out of every 10 clients, Bob Wesolowski estimates three pay RBR/Melville on time with no problems, three pay in terms, three eventually pay and at least one simply doesn't pay. "You're a god to them when the snow comes down and you're the devil in April," he says.

RBR/Melville chases about \$100,000 in delinquent accounts every year, of which they commit themselves to recoup every single penny owed to them. Wesolowski has no qualms taking a client to court or, for that matter, prosecuting an employee who steals from the company. "I will not let a customer or a subcontractor walk out of here beating us out of money," he says. "I will go to court for \$200 because I don't want the word to get out that you can walk out on us. You don't beat us out of money. I don't let that happen."

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