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Excellence in Installation

Penguin Windows Installs to the Letter

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Penguin Windows has made a machine out of window installations. Pumping out as many as 500 jobs per month, the Mukilteo, Wash., replacement window company knows that consistency is the ticket to quality. So Penguin's installers are taught to install windows with the same set of procedures every single time—whether it's the first window of the month or the hundredth.

"What simplifies our process is that we strictly follow the AAMA-developed guidelines [of InstallationMasters]," says Vaughn McCourt, director of operations. "It takes away from one guy doing it one way and another guy doing it another way."

The greater consistency in the installation, Penguin finds, the better the consistency in the feedback from customers. McCourt says countless letters flow into the company after the installation—the final and most memorable aspect of the project—is complete.

"Your installation team was great," write Brad and Barb Conway of Salem, Ore. "First class work and the windows and doors are breathtaking."

Another couple, Randy and Nell Klumph, also of Salem, Ore., write, "We are very pleased with the quality, appearance and energy savings with these windows, and we want to thank you for going the extra mile with us."

To keep the letters flowing, the Penguin management team has spent a lot of time and energy on developing and refining a process—essentially "leaning" the installation process—to make sure quality doesn't suffer at the hands of quantity. "This is just our way to make sure everything is done way every time."

THE MACHINE

Penguin Windows, formerly known as Statewide Windows before a rebranding campaign in early 2007, sells private-label vinyl windows produced by Great Lakes Window. The company has an aggressive canvassing marketing approach and a small army of salespeople who use in-home consultation to sell replacement windows and patio doors. The company's primary market is the Portland and Seattle region, but it also has a small office in Boston to serve the New England region.

With the volume of windows moving through the company, the management team recognized the need for a simple but comprehensive approach to its process, McCourt explains. They sat down a few years back and decided that installation would be an area worth some significant time and energy. "It's no surprise in our industry that we have somewhat of a black eye," he says. "What we want to do is create a situation that is almost hard to believe in the minds of the consumers. One of our core values is to provide customers with a superior replacement window experience. The installation is really the culmination of that experience."

So even though it comes with a higher price tag, Penguin uses in-house installers and asks them to follow a standard set of procedures for each job, McCourt explains. The company provides polo shirts with collars and logoed hats, to start. "We want to project a good image to our customer," he says, "and to us, that means no t-shirts. In the winter we provide jackets and hooded sweatshirts to our crews."

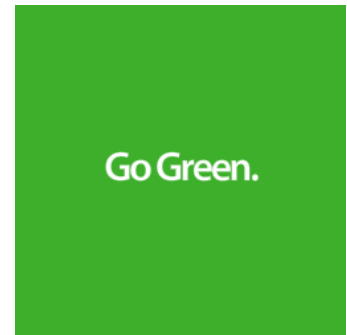
Much of what makes for a good installation is the preparation that goes into the job before the crew even leaves the warehouse for the job site, McCourt contends. The Penguin trucks, which are all identical and always have fewer than 125,000 miles, are well stocked with safety equipment, all the necessary supplies and tools and the correct window and doors to fulfill the order. "We make sure our trucks are stocked so they're not running to the hardware store every five minutes."



For Penguin Windows, the installation is the culmination of the entire window replacement project. To handle the company's volume, the installation teams strive for consistency from job to job.

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The Penguin installation process also relies on high-tech logistics management. They pay their teams by the hour—not the window—so the company wants to make sure that crews are not wasting time with bad directions or showing up at an unoccupied home. All trucks in the fleet are equipped with GPS—not only for getting crews to the job site quickly and efficiently, but to allow customer service reps to see where each truck is at all times. “Competition out there has forced us to really manage our installation efficiently,” McCourt says.

Everything about the process is mapped out and passed down from lead installers to new employees—from greeting the customer at the front door wearing a Penguin ball cap (the installer may remove it later, but must be wearing it for the first introduction) to using a plastic tent system to stop dust from getting all over the customer’s house, all the way to the final “leave it better than you found it” cleanup. “We’re out there selling to install windows in people’s houses,” McCourt says. “The installation is the actual show that the salesman is out there selling.”



All of Penguin's installations are completed according to InstallationMasters guidelines and employees are encouraged to make time for the details.

MOVING UP THE LADDER

When looking to hire new installers, the Penguin team seeks out experienced carpenters rather than experienced window installers. This allows the company to train the recruits in the Penguin process without the issue of previously-learned habits. “We’d rather find someone who works hard and train them,” McCourt says. “Nobody walks in off the street as the lead of a truck. They all start at entry level.”

Penguin has a clear advancement program within its installation teams. Each new hire starts as a number two helper, going through a two-week training program before heading out into the field. They’re assigned to a lead installer, handling assisting tasks like loading and unloading products and cleaning up job sites. They then start their “schools,” as Penguin officials call them—specialized training modules that focus on such specifics as safety and caulking. “You’d be amazed at how important caulking is,” McCourt says. “It’s the one visual thing a homeowner sees and they’ll judge the entire install based on

how the caulking looks.”

After three months in the field, a second helper has to take a Penguin certification exam. If the person can’t pass the exam, his employment with the company is terminated. “They should be able to pass it after three months with our guys,” McCourt explains.

Over time, number two helpers can be promoted to the number one helper on a crew. Besides the significant pay differential, being a number one helper also means the installer must start studying for the InstallationMasters program. Developed by AAMA and now administered by Architectural Testing Inc., InstallationMasters aims to be a “best practices” guideline for the installation of windows and patio doors. Penguin’s goal is to have all of its number one helpers InstallationMaster certified, or working toward the certification. “Besides consistency, this [promotion process and training] puts pressure on our top people to keep doing really good work,” McCourt says. “Everybody wants to move up the chain for the money, but there’s also a lot of prestige to go out in your own truck.”

Lead installers, the number one position in either two- or three-man crews, are charged with maintaining consistency from job to job. “We have 32 trucks and installation teams but it doesn’t matter who’s assigned to your house,” McCourt says. “The installation is done the same way again and again and it’s done according to the AAMA guidelines.”

There’s also another rung higher up on the ladder for lead installers. The company has a group of project inspectors who go from job to job—sometimes making multiple visits to the same site, during and then after the installation—to make sure the work has been done according to company standards. Within two weeks of completion, every single one of Penguin’s jobs is re-



A clear advancement path helps Penguin's installers know the exact steps they must take to be promoted into a lead installer position. Crew leaders can also work their way up to field inspector, the position responsible for putting the final stamp of approval on each and every installation job.

inspected by the field reps. "You can never have enough checks," McCourt says. "In our situation, where we want to provide a superior experience, you have to do your due diligence. It's not a matter of not trusting our crews. It's just good business practice to have that second check and make sure the customer is 100 percent satisfied."

CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT

McCourt adds that Penguin installers are always on the lookout for more efficient ways to execute a better installation. "I think it's always dangerous when you get comfortable," he says. "We're constantly on the lookout for the newest tool to get the job done. We may experiment with it on one truck, but then it'll go in all the trucks."

And as Penguin finds better ways to handle its volume of installs while maintaining quality, that means better value for its customers, McCourt contends. "Our installs are not cheap by any means, but I really believe we're giving customers a great value for their money. There are two parts to the window replacement process. There's good quality windows and then there's the way you put it in. A lot of companies sell windows but they don't have a good process for installing them. It creates problems. The most important thing to us is knowing they'll have an incredible experience."



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