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Produced by Kyle Gahm and Written by Molly Shaw

For Gene King, president and owner of Merlin King Inc., today's fast-track communication world doesn't stop him from making valuable face-to-face connections with customers. King says personal connections have helped him build his commercial remodel, design-build and specialty masonry business, now in its 34th year in operation in Indianapolis.

"Today, a lot of upcoming businesses rely on the Internet and social media to market themselves," says King. "We still benefit from that, but my main point of sale is a firm handshake and a look in the eye."

King recounts one instance when meeting the owner first won Merlin King the contract: "We did all of the millwork, doors and hardware for a large apartment complex in Illinois," he recounts. "When the job went out to bid, I got in my car and drove up to Madison, Wisconsin, to meet the owner face to face. He said I was the only contractor that did that and I got the job."





Relying on relationships and diverse service

Since inception, Merlin King has been going out of its way to build better relationships with customers — and it has paid off. Since the firm was established in 1981, Merlin King has completed more than 900 projects, ranging from a few hundred dollars to more than \$30 million.

“We’re a highly regarded commercial remodeler/design-build firm and we do a lot of hospitality and historic restoration work in Indianapolis,” says King.

Since relocating to Indianapolis from Southern California, Merlin King has scaled back significantly and refocused its efforts. “The business is currently myself and another employee, as well as a handful of field staff,” says King. “We went from a 65-man office as the 20th largest contractor in Southern California back in the late ‘80s, early ‘90s, to a much smaller shop since. Part of this was due to the downturn, but we’ve refocused and business is still good.”

King says if there is one thing he learned quickly through the recession, it’s the need to diversify. “You can’t put all of your eggs in one basket,” he says. “I’m a fully trained mason, so that helps land specialty jobs, but we also do design-build and we’re well-versed in auto CAD and sketch ups. I even write specifications for architectural firms. You can’t have just one niche.”

Today, Merlin King’s clients include architects, developers, national hotel owners, city and state agencies, medical facilities, historic preservation groups and even homeowners. But if King had to pick one area where Merlin King’s skills really shine it’s in the historical restoration market.

Ongoing work at Union Station

The company’s home office is appropriately located in the historic Union Station building in Indianapolis, where Merlin King is currently in the midst of a major façade restoration. “I have a great deal of historic masonry experience,” says King. “I’ve traveled to Europe and studied at the Lime Center in London and done research in Scotland. I’m also probably one of the only Americans that have ever taken a mortar sample out of the Kremlin Wall in Moscow. The Kremlin Wall is a fortress surrounding the Moscow Kremlin government facilities and it dates back to the 1500s.”





Merlin King has been working with Union Station for more than 18 years. King has been an influential person in many historic restorations at the site, including the masonry stabilization project of the train shed roof and head house, comprised of 7 acres of smoke vents, skylights and monitors. After months of addressing life safety issues and structural repair, King was challenged to find the right unique color and texture brick to match the façade.

As the first major restoration he'd participated in at Union Station, King learned quickly the secret to historical project success. "This project was a learning process for the whole team," he recounts. "We decided early on that if the project was to be completed successfully, with the right products and within budget, three things had to be accomplished: control, control, control."



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Currently, Merlin King is working on the south wall restoration at Union Station, following the rehabilitation of the east wall. "We're rebuilding the south wall due to a structural failure with one of the columns a few years back, which caused it to buckle near the train tracks," details King. "The project involves a great deal of façade work and the completion date is set for October 2015."

Over the last 18 years, the company has also completed more than 25 projects for the City of Indianapolis and the Crowne Plaza Hotel. "The hospitality market is another strong suit for us," adds King. "We're currently working on a full-service Marriot hotel remodel in Nashville, Tennessee, at Vanderbilt University. One unique aspect includes filling in the swimming pool and putting in a huge fitness center. We're taking the old fitness center and putting in four new suites. We're also working at the Hampton Inn in Lafayette, Indiana."

With a focus on furthering these longstanding relationships, King sees Merlin King growing, but maintaining its small size and structure. "We're taking on more jobs and a few new clients, but we want to remain a small-to-mid-level construction company and getting back into the business of self-performing most of the work" he says.

Maintaining this size allows Merlin King to do what it does best — cultivate close customer connections with face-to-face and hand-shake meetings that build trust and confidence. •

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6015 Orchard Hill Lane
Indianapolis, IN 46220

www.arxtheon.com

(317) 520-2558



MERLIN KING INC.

39 WEST JACKSON PLACE
INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46225
UNITED STATES

WWW.MERLINKING.COM