

California Contractor Puts Employees First

IC Refrigeration was named Best Contractor to Work For in the West region

BY NICOLE KRAWCKE
THE NEWS STAFF

The employees of IC Refrigeration are a close-knit group. The company goes above and beyond to put the welfare of its employees and their families before the business, creating an open, family-oriented culture, which is something the employees know is rare in today's business world. It's for that reason, Ceres, Cal-

ifornia-based IC Refrigeration was chosen as *The NEWS'* Best Contractor to Work For in the West region.

"I saw the contest in *The NEWS* and applied because I decided we were definitely worth it," said Jessica Stephens, purchasing agent and nine year veteran of the company. "I can't imagine finding a company that cares more about its employees than IC. The owners understand that

family comes first. This is just a business; it will still be here the next day. That is not something you find everywhere."

Rich Imfeld, president and co-owner of the company with his father, Dick Imfeld, and business partner, Kevin Silva, was pleasantly surprised to win the contest.

"It's fantastic," he said. "I'm really happy — this one's for my dad."

A FAMILY TRADITION

IC Refrigeration was founded in 1940 by Rich Imfeld's grandfather, W.W. "Bill" Imfeld, and Paul Cloutier. Bill Imfeld was working in another shop and decided he wanted to make 50 cents an hour. When the owner refused, he left to start IC. The company originally began in dairy and market refrigeration and slowly grew into light commercial and residential work.

Dick Imfeld joined the company in 1961 after graduating from California Polytechnic State University and moved into a managerial role when his father semi-retired in 1964.

"I just fell into the family business," Dick Imfeld said. "I didn't really know what I was getting into. I was a business major in college, so that gave me a good background. My dad made the conscious decision to go into air conditioning because it was a growing field. We moved away from market refrigeration in 1987, and the business was small at that time. My wife and I took the remnants of it and ran with it. We hit the lotto when the economy and construction were good. We grew and evolved into what we are now — a mechanical contractor.

"My favorite thing about this job is the variety," he continued. "We still do residential work, and I'm working on a 15-story building in Oakland right now."

Rich Imfeld joined his father's company in 1992 after a stint in the U.S. Navy and graduating from Fresno State.

"I decided to go into the family business to continue my grandfather's legacy," Rich Imfeld said. "I thought it was really neat to perpetuate something he started. Also, I studied to be a lawyer in

Tale of the Tape: IC Refrigeration Service Inc.



THE BEST CONTRACTORS TO WORK FOR 2016

CONTRACTOR: IC Refrigeration Service Inc.

OWNER: Richard Imfeld

LOCATIONS: Ceres, California

YEARS IN BUSINESS: 76

BULK OF MARKET: Commercial

TOTAL SALES FOR 2015: \$7.34 million

TOTAL EMPLOYEES: 45

TOTAL SERVICE TECHNICIANS AND INSTALLERS: 34

AVERAGE HOURS EMPLOYEES SPEND IN TRAINING: 41 or more hours a year.

BENEFITS BEYOND MEDICAL/DENTAL INSURANCE: The company offers a 401(k), safe harbor profit sharing, end of year bonus, paid training, paid vacation and holidays, flexible time off, and paternity leave for new fathers. It also supplies all tools for its technicians.

INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION & CONTRACTOR GROUP MEMBERS: ACCA

THE NEWS SELECTED THIS CONTRACTOR BECAUSE: Among other things, IC Refrigeration was named Best Contractor to Work For because of its belief that employees and their families come first.



MANY BENEFITS: IC Refrigeration offers medical, limited dental, and vision insurance and pays 80 percent of total costs. The company also provides a 401(K) retirement plan, Safe Harbor profit sharing, an end of the year bonus, paid vacation and holidays, flexible time off, and paternity leave for new fathers.

college, but I realized real fast that I didn't want to be a lawyer. I saw how my dad got to work with my grandfather, and I liked that. I get to work with my dad and see him most days of the week. He's a resource for me, which is something I appreciate."

Over the years, the company

continued to grow. "By shrinking our core competencies, we became more profitable and more reactive to other opportunities, which included transitioning into a full-service design-build mechanical services contractor," Rich Imfeld said. "We also offer fire protection, hood cleaning,

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test and balance, HVAC, and select refrigeration services.”

The company operates in the light commercial, residential, refrigeration, and fire protection markets.

Silva, vice president and co-owner, joined IC 20 years ago, bringing the restaurant end of the business with him.

“A friend of mine was working here at the time and highly recommended the company,” he said. “The biggest thing about IC is the team atmosphere between employees and departments.

“It’s like a big family — it’s our family away from home,” Silva continued. “We, as a company, tend to take on a lot of difficult projects and always seem to work out a way to get them done.”

IC has 45 employees, 34 of them technicians and installers, and 34 fleet vehicles. Its 2015 revenue was \$7.34 million, and, while the final numbers have yet to be tallied, was on track to surpass that in 2016.

According to Rich Imfeld, he has a moral obligation to offer his employees year-round employment, 40 hours a week.

“If one department is slow and the other is not, we ship them in there to help out,” Dick Imfeld added. “The only thing is, people have to travel here for work sometimes. We’re out of town a lot but we’re very fortunate to have jobs lined up and always have places to go.”

IC’s normal service area is a 50 mile radius from downtown Modesto, California; however, for specific jobs, it can extend to 200 miles.

PUTTING EMPLOYEES FIRST

In addition to ensuring its employees’ employment year-round, IC offers medical, limited dental, and vision insurance and pays 80 percent of total costs. Additionally, the company provides a 401(k) retirement plan, Safe Harbor profit sharing, an end of the year bonus, paid vacation and holidays, flexible time off, and paternity leave for new fathers.

IC also provides all of its technicians with the tools of the trade and allows them to take company vehicles home.

“It’s very expensive,” Rich Imfeld said when discussing the price of outfitting each technician with tools. “However, it’s nice because every truck is now standardized by department.”

Rich Imfeld estimated that it costs the company around \$10,000 to outfit a service vehicle.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE: IC Refrigeration in Ceres, California, equips all of its technicians with the tools of the trade and allows them to take company vehicles home. Rich Imfeld, president of the company, estimated that it costs around \$10,000 to outfit a service vehicle, about \$2,500 for sheet metal, \$1,000 for fire protection, and less than \$5,000 for specialty metals.



DIVERSIFIED MARKETS: IC Refrigeration has evolved from dairy and market refrigeration when it was founded in 1940 to light commercial, residential, refrigeration, and fire protection markets. It’s that diversification that allows the company to ensure its employees work 40 hours a week year-round.

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cle, about \$2,500 for sheet metal, \$1,000 for fire protection, and less than \$5,000 for specialty metals.

“And that’s not counting inventory, that’s just tools,” Rich Imfeld said.

The company also takes employees’ suggestions to heart with a suggestion box. Rich Imfeld said he responds to all suggestions within 24 hours, placing

both the question and response on the company’s suggestion board for everyone to see.

“The good thing about the size of our company is we literally have an open-door policy,” Silva said. “Anyone can walk into any manager’s office, sit down, and talk about any problems or ideas. The open-door policy is important because managers need to



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EMPLOYEES FIRST: Ceres, California-based IC Refrigeration was named as *The ACHR NEWS*’ 2016 Best Contractor to Work For in the West region. The company cares about the welfare of its employees and their families and offers a number of benefits to take care of them both.

recognize if there are signs of a burnout or if an employee is going through something. Being tuned into our employees and making ourselves approachable at any time makes this a lot nicer place to work.”

In addition, while IC doesn’t have a structured training schedule per se, it spends a lot of time doing on-the-job training.

“A lot of our techs have been with us a long time, so we have a top-heavy service department,” Rich Imfeld said. “We lead by example and have lots of on-the-job training. We train on topics as they come up. I like to find people who have a strong work ethic and an aptitude for the industry. I call it ‘aptitude and attitude.’ We also pay for additional certifications, like NATE [North American Technician Excellence].”

Overall, Rich Imfeld said providing these things to his employees is just the right thing to do.

“It’s like that movie, ‘Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure.’ I always liked that line, ‘Be excellent to each other.’ It goes back to treating people the way you’d like to be treated.

“The workforce has changed. Employees are not just happy to have a job. They want careers that are fulfilling financially and mentally,” continued Rich Imfeld. “They have to have stability and recognition of the fact that people have families. They can’t work every waking moment for the company. That’s changed from Dad’s time. I remember him telling me people used to be happy to have a job.”

“In order to keep good employees, you have to be competitive and keep up with your com-



FAMILY BUSINESS: IC Refrigeration was founded in 1940 by W.W. “Bill” Imfeld with Paul Cloutier. Dick Imfeld (shown here), past president and co-owner of the business, joined his father’s company in 1961 and helped it evolve from dairy and market refrigeration into the mechanical contracting company it is today.



CONTINUING A LEGACY: Rich Imfeld, president and co-owner of IC Refrigeration, decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and continue the legacy his grandfather started when opening IC Refrigeration. “I thought it was neat to perpetuate something he started,” Imfeld said. “And I realized real quickly that I didn’t want to be a lawyer.”

petition,” Silva added. “If you’re not offering a retirement plan, you’re going to lose your folks to other companies who are. If you’re not paying good people a rate that’s comparable to your competition, you’re going to lose them.”

Stephens said she loves working at IC because of the sense of family and togetherness.

“I like the feel of home here and family here. I like knowing if something happened and I had to take time off, they would work with me,” she said. “Family comes first. This is a job. We all love and support the company, but family always comes first. The owners work for the betterment of the employees. That’s a very different mindset than the majority of companies out there. And it’s not bad that people think of their businesses first, that’s what they do — it’s their livelihood, but Richard and Dick have come to the conclusion that when you treat your employees right, they treat your customers right, and it comes full circle.

“It’s not always the big things, but the small things that make us stay,” Stephens continued. “When they pass you in the hall and don’t just ask, ‘How are you?’ Instead, they ask, ‘How is your father-in-law who had a stroke last month?’ They truly and honestly care about every person who works here. I’m honored to say that I work for IC Refrigeration and wouldn’t change a thing.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

It’s business as usual at IC for the immediate future, but all three owners have plans to continue growing and bettering the company.

“A lot of companies are trying to become bigger, but my goal is not to be bigger, but to be better,” said Silva. “The way we do that is by keeping up with technology and being relevant in the marketplace. The one thing that makes us unique is we’re very diversified. I don’t know if there are too many companies that do fire protection. I think that makes us unique. It’s that uniqueness that keeps us busy year-round. When you keep your employees busy 40 hours a week, it keeps them happy and helps with morale.

“But the one thing I want to stress is not putting work first,” he continued. “It’s important to put your employees’ families first. Sometimes we can get out of balance and think work is the most

important thing, and that thing you need to do with your kid can wait. I think being flexible is what makes a happy workplace.”

Dick Imfeld, while semi-retired from the company, still comes to work most days.

“If you talk to my wife, I’m only off on Tuesdays,” he said. “My goal is to keep the company go-

ing as long as possible. My wife and I own the building, and the company pays rent, so we call it the Dick and Shirley retirement fund. The company has grown slightly every year, and it’s a controlled growth, which is good. So we’re just trying to maximize our position in the industry. The rest takes care of itself.”

Rich Imfeld joked that his dad would continue working at the company until his funeral.

“He’s doing things he likes to do, and we finally have him training others,” he said. “I’m very excited about the new challenges the future will bring. There’s always the question of what happens to the company

after me. I’m still fairly young, and I have to worry about my dad, the landlord. I’m aware of the situation, and I have Kevin here who has an equity stake, which makes a difference. I have some work years left, and I’m going to continue to honor and respect the company my grandfather started.” ■



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