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Premier Pools & Spas elevates new talent in the pool industry

Partnering with the Pool & Hot Tub Alliance, Sacramento-based company is able to educate and certify young professionals

When Lance Irby came to work at Premier Pools & Spas for owner Keith Harbeck back in 2012, he didn't even know what a skimmer was.

"But I found out pretty quickly!" he jokes, now 10 years into his career as a pool professional and sales manager at Premier Pools & Spas in Sacramento, California.

Irby's previous industry "experience" consisted of one public swimming pool lesson and some construction work. He rose to become the man his mentor Harbeck calls "the best pool salesman I've ever met." That's high praise considering Harbeck founded Premier Pools & Spas in 1988, a company that is now the world's largest pool builder with franchises in over 60 locations.

Like many construction businesses, pool builders have struggled to attract and keep young talent like Irby. It's something that Harbeck noticed and felt compelled to change.

"Although we have some salespeople here that had worked previously for other builders, it's not really what we do anymore. And that's true in other places, too, even in scheduling and supervision," says Harbeck, who himself started cleaning pools as a kid. "I think it's far more important to hire for character as opposed to skill. We can train and teach in this industry."



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Certification programs raise the bar

The Pool & Hot Tub Alliance (PHTA) supports that goal of bringing new life into the industry. PHTA sets professional standards and provides education and certification. Irby took “every single class” PHTA offered last year and became a Certified Master Pool Builder & Design Professional. It’s the highest level of certification under the PHTA Certified Pool Builder & Design Professional Pathway powered by GENESIS® and offered in-person and virtually.

Premier Pools & Spas just signed up 43 more people to begin their certification tracks this year, an investment Harbeck champions and that Irby says “really fast-tracked” his abilities.

Harbeck and Irby both say the message is clear: “This is a career. It doesn’t have to be just a job.”

“I had other jobs before I worked at Premier Pools & Spas. I would clock in at nine and clock out at five. And I knew when my breaks and my lunchtimes were, and it was mundane and repetitive,” Irby recalls. “Our industry is quite dynamic. I don’t know that we always represent ourselves as an industry, as a very professional environment or destination for skilled employees.”

Weathering change all comes down to customers and employees

“Dynamic” is an understated way to describe a long career in this business. The constant change is one of the reasons Harbeck has stuck with the business for these 30+ years. Technology has impacted everything. The move from phone book listings to online and text message advertising and communication. The digitization and increasing complexity of the permitting process. The shift to 3D software and virtual reality in sales and design. These are all areas that require new approaches.

“When I started in ‘88, yes, there were some elaborate pools, but not like today. There are so many features and options, and things people can add to swimming pools. It’s a much different product and a much different consumer,” Harbeck says. “So, it’s a relatively young industry when you stop and think about it.”

The technological acceleration comes as the swimming pool business is booming. It’s a flashback to the recession for Harbeck. Business peaked pre-recession when he was building 1,000 pools a year in the Sacramento area. By 2008, he was building 260 pools a year. It nearly put him out of business.

“It was the Great American Pool Depression. We had a 75% decrease in business. What it did teach me then, as always, it comes down to your customer service and your reputation,” Harbeck says. “The experience of building a pool has always been my passion. So, as we came out of that recession, I redoubled the focus on that.”

Harbeck hit the streets. He went door-to-door putting up fliers to drum up business. It worked. Premier Pools & Spas survived and thrived. For the first 10 years out of the recession, the business grew at 20% per year.

Training the next generation of pros

Last year Premier Pools & Spas saw a whopping 37% growth rate. Harbeck doesn’t bank on that being sustainable. Instead of stepping back from the day-to-day he has dived in deeper, especially where it comes to training up his next generation of leaders, like Irby, who in turn champion his emphasis on customer service.

“Keith is a great teacher. He treats people well. He is kind. He is humble. And when you’re that way as a leader, and then you instill that in other people throughout the organization, it just has a trickle-down effect to even how we treat our customers,” says Irby.

Now Irby’s brother has joined him in the pool business. He says he will keep spreading the message that the pool industry is the place to be, that this is “a very good career (that) will take care of your family.”

Consider the newest Irby in the business just one more person who will be starting a PHTA certification program soon. Irby says he knows how it makes people feel to be empowered in their careers.

“Everybody was extremely excited about what they were learning,” he says of his team’s GENESIS® journey. “There was a lot of positivity on the job site the next day after being online. It’s a lot of work, but very fulfilling.”



Keith Harbeck



Lance Irby



Train people well
enough to leave, treat
them good enough so
they stay.

Lance Irby