



Angie's List Service Excellence for All

By Tom Schuman

Eleven o'clock on Friday mornings in Indianapolis takes many visitors by surprise when the tornado warning sirens blare for their weekly test. For some employees at Angie's List who are used to the short interruption, work stops – but just long enough to slide down the fire pole in the company's renovated firehouse headquarters just east of downtown.

"We're not your typical kind of office setting," offers Angie Hicks, the namesake of the company that occupied a spot for three consecutive years earlier this decade on the Inc. 500 list of fastest growing companies. "It's a pretty relaxed environment around here. We encourage people to never take yourself too seriously."

Company growth has been serious business, however, for Hicks and co-founder/CEO Bill Oesterle. Angie's List is a member-driven review and rating service of local providers in 250 categories ranging from roofers to animal groomers. What started in Columbus, Ohio in 1995 is now a national success story with programs in 124 cities and 250-plus employees scattered throughout several rehabilitated buildings in an urban campus setting.

Customer service is the name of the game, with call center staff handling telephone and electronic communications with members and service providers around the country. Data processing ("we review each and every report ... to protect the integrity of our data," Hicks says), information technology and production of locally tailored

magazines, which include coupons from highly rated providers, are also key departments within the organization.

Hicks terms the call center a "breeding ground for a lot of managers. We made sure these jobs are high-paying in the call center world. We get talented people, get them in the right setting and let them stretch themselves. We get a ton of fresh college graduates, who often find their way to other areas."

According to Hicks, Oesterle is the "keeper of the culture." Open door policies, suggestion boxes that are taken seriously (a workout facility, as an example, was added to meet employee needs), random lunches with people from different departments and community outreach efforts (Oesterle sitting in a dunk tank wearing a suit as part of fund-raiser) are among the initiatives that help keep company turnover at low levels.

Money, of course, cannot be overlooked. "Two things we like to spend money on are our members and our staff. Most have some type of incentives in their compensation, and we have various contests. You'll hear the bell ring (when members are added or specific goals are met). People in the call center have a nicer space to work in than me or anyone else, which is exactly what we want."

The employee count was fewer than 25 when the company moved to its current location in 2001. Major 2006 expansion (into cities including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.) completed the original goal of being in the top 50 U.S. markets.

"Our goal now is to continue to grow in existing markets and enter new ones. We're trying to figure out how small a city can support an Angie's List, and we've looked at going international as well," Hicks reveals. "We like to keep that entrepreneurial atmosphere in here, even at more than 250 people. We want smart people who are willing to work hard, who have that vision, that drive to be part of the bigger picture."

Angie's list

You Should Know

The expansion of Angie's List to the West Coast is proving popular with travelers stuck in that infamous California traffic. Hicks says, "We have a lot of people calling during their commute, saying, 'Can you e-mail (a list of providers in their needed category) to me? It will be at work when I get there.'"

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Call center employees are often on the fast track to promotions and increased responsibility.

Thank you letters arrive frequently at Angie's List and are displayed below this decorative sign.

