

King's Transfer: A Family Moving Company Focused on Excellence

By Kim Biggar



Bill O'Donnell

For brothers Bill and Charlie O'Donnell...the company is part of their heritage, a legacy they're passionate about.

HAVING BEEN in business since 1922, Montreal's King's Transfer Van Lines has figured out a couple of important things: what they're good at and how to do it well. Founded by William O'Donnell, the company has been run by the O'Donnell family for almost 90 years. For brothers Bill and Charlie O'Donnell, who now manage King's Transfer as president and senior vice-president, respectively, the company is part of their heritage, a legacy they're passionate about.

Focusing as it always has on commercial and household-goods moving, the company has developed its expertise in the moving and storage industry. As Bill says, by sticking to what they know, the company is able to "do it better." They haven't made the foray that many other moving companies have made into the logistics business. The numerous awards the company has won from Atlas Van Lines – which are given based mainly on the results of customer surveys – demonstrate that the company's approach works.

■ Services and Facilities

Headquartered in Montreal, King's Transfer has offices in Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg and Calgary. Its international division, founded in 1999, is based in Lasalle, Que. From these facilities, the company provides local, national, cross-border and international moving services and storage. Corporate relocations into and out of the U.S. are a big part of King's Transfer's business.

As a founding member of Atlas Van Lines and one of only five shareholders in that company, King's Transfer is also one of Atlas's longest-serving agents.

■ Philosophy of Excellence

A commitment to customer service defines King's Transfer. Training sessions for employees – packers, loaders, drivers and salespeople – continually emphasize the importance of dealing with customers with respect and careful attention. Employees are taught that they are, in effect, paid by their customers; their excellent service promotes repeat and new business for the company, and helps to secure their employment into the future.

This thinking builds on the company's core tenet that the customer is always the central and most-important person in any transaction. Although staff complete moves on a regular basis, for many customers, moves are a big event. Bill O'Donnell notes that King's Transfer training encourages employees to "have their game on" with each move. He adds that moving itself is not difficult; it is the customer-service element of each job that requires the most skill. And it is customer service that is at the heart of most of the company's ongoing skills-upgrading efforts.

Hiring the right people has been critical to King's Transfer's success, according to Bill. "It's easy to train the right people with the right attitude," he says. While the company generally hires people with moving experience,

management is also keen to ensure that new hires have attributes such as willingness, helpfulness and attention to detail that fit its customer-centric focus. As Bill points out, "No two moves are the same. Everyone has different needs." The company's movers – its front-line employees – are recognized as the most-important component in its approach to customer service, and are valued as more than just packers and loaders.

■ Adapting to a New Era of Business

Bill believes that a "new era of business" began five or six years ago, pushing moving companies into an increasingly challenging environment. The Internet, in particular, has changed how moving companies do business. Where customers would formerly seek out two or three estimates for a move, they're now able to fairly simply request a dozen or more online. Customers are better educated about options and expect more from service providers, but, in

using the Internet to gather quotations, they reduce their personal interaction with salespeople...and the opportunities for companies to sell on quality of service, rather than price.

The competition this has brought about sees companies underpricing moving jobs. According to Bill, prices are five to 10 years out of date. Keeping up with labour costs and the need for equipment upgrades in this situation can put a real strain on a company's finances.

Changes in the marketplace are also due, Bill thinks, to other factors. People seem to be busier than ever, especially with their jobs. As "fewer people are doing more work," says Bill, "their time is limited." They want to get estimates for moves when they're available – on weekends and evenings – rather than during the regular 9-to-5 workday.

Culture changes and the impacts of 9/11 on cross-border moves have further complicated the picture for Canada's moving companies.

Bill expects that the industry itself will need to change to deal with the changes being thrust upon it. In particular, he foresees that players in the field will need to tackle issues related to destructive competition.

■ Looking Ahead

Between them, Bill and Charlie O'Donnell have four daughters. So far, none of them have shown a great deal of interest in taking over leadership of the family business. It's too early to know if this three-generation business will be led sometime down the road by another O'Donnell. What is probably safe to say, though, is that, given their sustained focus on excellence, Bill and Charlie will have a plan in place well before it's needed to ensure the ongoing success of King's Transfer.

Bill O'Donnell is the winner of CAM's 2010 Founders Award. More information about King's Transfer Van Lines can be found at www.kingstransfer.com.



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