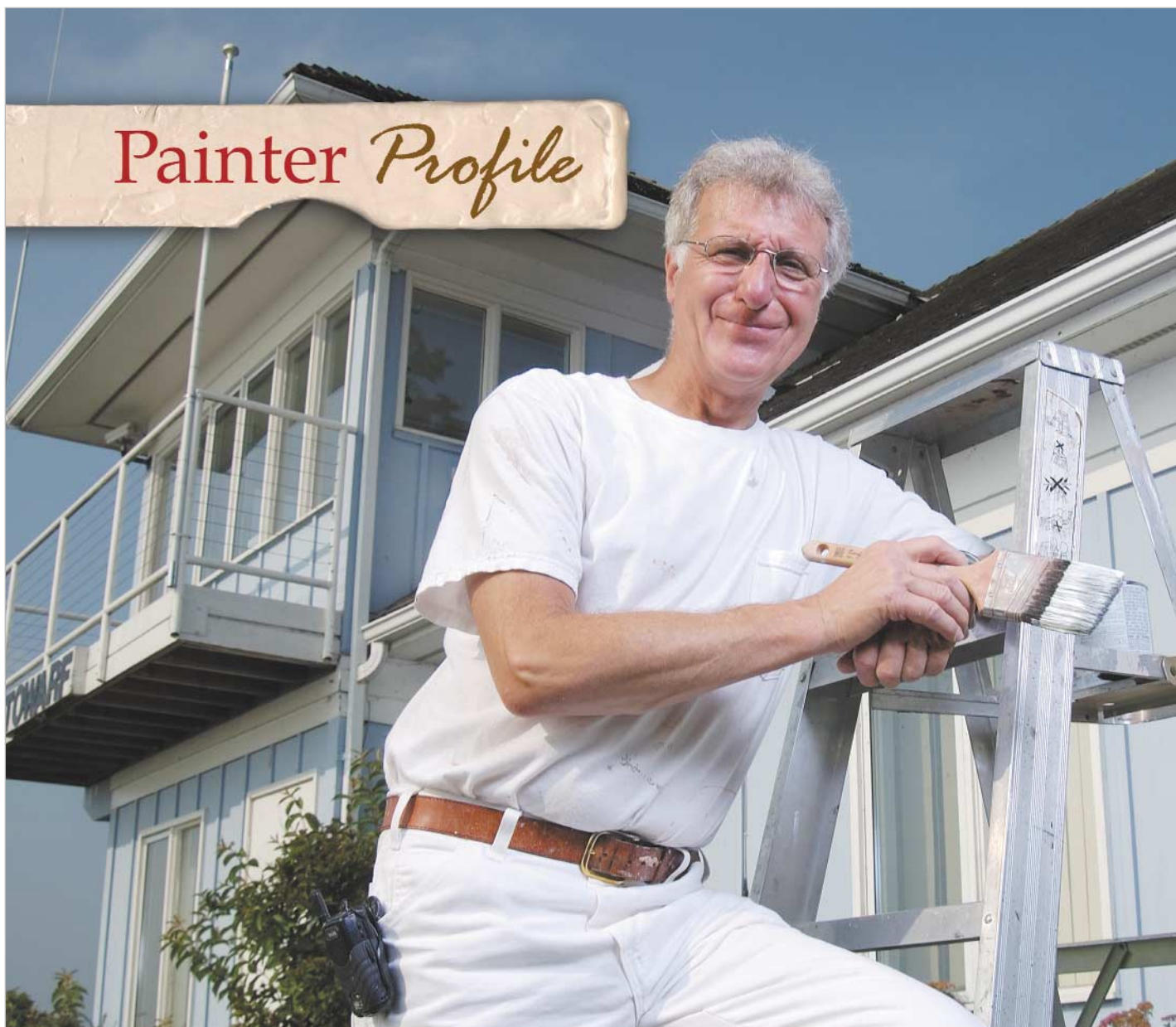


Painter Profile



Playing at perfection

It took some time, but Frank Seviour's creative skills are now right where they belong

By Kara Kurylłowicz

“Aaahhhh – he’s trying to upsell me.”

That was David LaThangue’s first reaction when Frank Seviour, a fellow Brit and the man he was considering hiring for some paint work, suggested a high-end paint for part of the job. But then, moments later, Seviour recommended a much cheaper product that would be sufficient to go beneath the final coat.

“Hmmm—now he’s downselling me!” LaThangue was confused until he realized that Seviour knew his products and paints, and was simply recommending exactly what would give the best results. “He didn’t need to do



that," said LaThangue, who first met Seviour through Professional Platinum Networkers, which meets twice a month to exchange referrals in Burlington, Ont. But he learned quickly that Seviour was not the kind of person to play games just to gain a buck or two.

LaThangue, who once installed marble fireplace mantels in the U.K., is the owner of Bulldog Productions, a corporate AV provider. He had his new understanding confirmed when he discovered that Seviour worked with plasterers in England as he himself did years ago. "U.K. plasterers apply three layers of plaster onto ancient bricks walls and eventually create a wall so smooth that you can place a level against it," says

LaThangue. Sure enough, Seviour spent an entire day masking LaThangue's house for a one-hour spray painting job on his stucco ceilings. "The skill level and attention to detail required of U.K. plasterers is quite extraordinary," says LaThangue.

Uncertain start

Seviour left school at 15 to sell hydraulic belts for earth moving machines, then spent the next 15 years doing jobs he loathed. Selling belts didn't work out too well. All it was giving him, he says, was "sore bum" from sitting all day, so he moved on, and on again, switching jobs every six months or so. By the age of 30, he'd done everything from driving a London subway train to setting hot type in printing machines to programming the mainframe computers that were then the size of small houses. When he suddenly found himself unemployed, the British government stepped in and trained him as a plasterer. Seviour was instantly smitten with the building trade and committed to four years' worth of evening classes to combine carpentry with plastering. "I found my niche at 30," says Seviour. "I liked being creative, working with my hands, interacting with people and working in many different environments – it was perfect."

Continual learning has always been a part of Seviour's life, whether the new skills are trade- or business-related. In the U.K., he regularly worked for the Department of the Environment (DOE), which controls all government properties, encompassing parks as well as military, civil service and historical buildings. "I was lucky enough to get my foot in the door after being referred by the friend of a friend," says Seviour. "I was in the right place at the right time and it taught me that being honest with people really makes a positive impression."

On to Canada

Seviour eventually had his own workshop in the Royal Artillery barracks. The variety of skills required by the DOE forced him to constantly develop new abilities, often on the spot. He learned then that both companies and individuals like knowing that they can

deal with a single person that they trust implicitly. Whether it was the troops trashing the barracks after a raucous night out or a horse pulling its tethering ring out of the stable wall, Seviour stepped in. When the new colonel-in-chief took over a Hyde Park apartment, Seviour helped the officer's wife redecorate to her taste. He even filled holes in the tarmac around the barracks until the road crew arrived.

While visiting his stepson in Canada in 1985, Seviour, who celebrates his twentieth anniversary in Canada next year, was struck by the energy, vibrancy and sheer physical space as well as the opportunities. "I couldn't believe how quickly things moved in Canada compared to back home," he says. "Things just seemed to be hopping and the family connection made it relatively easy to make the move."

When he first arrived in Canada, he worked as a refinisher exclusively for a family-owned kitchen manufacturer until the business was bankrupted by the recession in the late 1980s. At that point, Seviour still considered himself a jack-of-all-trades, but didn't have the equipment, tools or Canadian experience required to work as a general contractor. Instead, he chose to focus on painting and broaden his abilities within that area, adding abilities such as faux finishing to his portfolio. "Be a generalist but with a specialty and never ever depend on one source for anything, whether it's a client, a supplier or a sub-contractor," says Seviour.

A painter is born

When Seviour met a general contractor that needed a painter for commercial work, he established his company, White Oaks Painters, and stepped into his new career. That general contractor was an exclusive supplier to Second Cup, but also worked for a number of other large retail chains and malls. Second Cup was growing exponentially in the 1990's and Seviour traveled across Ontario, painting and faux finishing new franchise locations. But when Second Cup was sold, the incoming executive team banished single-source relationships. "It was wonderful while it lasted, but I won't put all my eggs in one basket ever again," says

Seviour, who admits he was learning that lesson for the second time.

While the money had been terrific, the travel that Seviour originally found so enjoyable had become a grind. The new immigrant certainly saw more of the province as he zigzagged from mall to mall, but, in the end, the killer commutes (four to six hours some days) and the sameness of the malls and hotels left more of an impression than the expansive geography. "Being away from home year after year wasn't fun anymore," says Seviour, who sometimes devoted two full weeks, including weekends, to a single mall in one town, without seeing his wife.



Union blues

Seviour, now a business owner with a number of employees, was also coming up against unions like never before. He discovered that unions could shut down projects for many months. It took White Oaks years to recover from a six-month mall shut-down that cost him a fortune in overtime because he was committed to meeting certain deadlines at previously agreed upon prices. Overtime regulations are very different in the U.K. and Seviour was stunned when he found himself paying double-time after 4:30 pm. because workers had been moving at half-speed since 7:30 am. In addition, as an owner, he was shut out of union meetings even though he spent at least as much time painting

as his full-time painters. "It was an eye-opener – from the extra paperwork to the attitudes," says Seviour. "The system can drive people like me out of the industry."

first few meetings.

But after three years of weekly practice that began "Hi, my name is Frank. I'm from the U.K. and I didn't even have an accent until I arrived in



Going homes

After working exclusively in commercial painting for a decade, the move to residential presented yet another challenge. Seviour suddenly had to go out and sell himself to prospects, which demanded a whole new set of skills. He joined Business Network International (BNI), a networking group that meets once a week. The then-very-shy Seviour quite literally shook his way through the

Canada...," he was so comfortable speaking in front of people that he became president of his Oakville chapter. "To pique people's interest week after week, I became a good storyteller," says Seviour. "Sharing anecdotes, particularly about the 'royal' jobs that I've done over the years, reels people in."

BNI offers excellent training and Seviour discovered that networking is

an acquired skill that can be honed and improved. He has met hundreds of people through the network, amongst whom he discovered a handful of gems. He also learned the do's and don'ts of networking, the importance of making a good first impression and the power of a tagline. His "From drab to fab" slogan helps prospects remember White Oaks because it tells people what he can do for them.

Networking can be as simple as being open and friendly. Seviour often made casual, polite conversation with a neighbor that lived across the street in Oakville. One day, the neighbor said, "You're a painter, right? I need someone to help me do a small paint job for the Town of Oakville." Seviour agreed to help his neighbor, who worked as a maintenance man for the town, and has been painting, repairing and plastering a variety of heritage and other buildings for the town ever since. Seviour bids on the large jobs that go to tender, but now that the technical officers know and trust him, Seviour is

often assigned the smaller jobs directly. "I love working for the town because of the huge variety," says Seviour, who always wears immaculate painters' whites on-site to convey a professional image. "I might be repairing crown mouldings or water damage in a museum."

His net keeps working

While he now gives and gets referrals and has great businesscards, Seviour still hasn't advertised in the Yellow Pages or painted his company name on his van, let alone built a Web site. "I know that I need to get my name and face out there, but networking has



been my bread and butter," says Seviour, who doesn't want the hassle of employees anymore and would rather remain a sole proprietor who sub-contracts to painters who also call on him when they get too busy.

Seviour often collaborates with Yovan Gabric of Gabric Painting in Oakville, Ont., whom he met through BNI. Gabric loves the fact that Seviour isn't afraid of other painters and happily shares his wisdom and experience. Of course, they'll discuss their favourite products, how to get a particular sheen and when to avoid oil-based paint. But they also talk about what's important to them outside of work, such as rock music and old British bands, politics and current events. "I've picked up plenty of painting tricks from him – he has confidence in himself so he's not afraid of competition," says Gabric.

Seviour's confidence comes through in other ways as well. For example, he now trusts his gut, gives extraordinarily detailed quotes and



knows when to walk away. A good client can turn bad overnight, as Seviour discovered with a former commercial client, who had played fair and paid on-time until then. Seviour's final job for that client started just like any other, but when Seviour had a

hard time getting him on the phone, he had a bad feeling. When the \$18,000 invoice wasn't paid, Seviour put a lien on the building and was eventually paid out. "Without the lien, I had no legal redress and the paint bill alone was \$6,000 – I had to take immediate

What we learned

At Pro Painter, we keep learning. Here's what we learned about the painting business from Frank Seviour.

Recommend the products that are right for the job, regardless of cost or availability. One of Seviour's clients was very impressed when he recommended a cheaper paint to go beneath the final high-end coat. That's expertise and honesty making an irresistible combination.

Put the time and effort into proper preparation. As Seviour proved, clients do notice, but, better yet, the completed work will continue to make the kind of impression that wins repeat business and referrals for much longer.

Take the time you need to figure out what you really love because you'll be doing it for the rest of your life. Seviour eventually found his perfect fit.

Know yourself. You can't figure out what type of painting best suits you until you really wrap your brain around what inspires you, what bores you, what challenges you and what feels just right.

Learn as many skills as you can. Seviour always finds work because he can do a variety of related home improvement and repair tasks and offer clients the coveted one-stop shop. And advertise them. Your skills won't pay the bills if no one knows what you can do.

Get out there. Meet as many people as you can. As Seviour has discovered, the people that you get to know will have friends, acquaintances, family, colleagues and even their own clients to whom they can refer you. He made a point of learning and mastering the art of networking.

Be nice to everyone and about everyone because you never know when and in what circumstances your paths will cross.

Never rely exclusively on a single skill, a sole client, a particular supplier or your favourite sub-contractor. Always have a backup or another option because nothing lasts forever. It's a lesson Seviour learned a few times. He won't ever put himself in that position again.

Do your research before you commit to any contract. If Seviour had been more familiar with local union rules, he might have tackled the residential market sooner and saved himself a lot of money and trouble.

Listen to your gut instincts. They're based on your years of experience and your ability to read people's actions, patterns, tones of voice and facial expressions. Seviour finally paid attention to what his gut was telling him about certain jobs – he just wished he'd started paying attention earlier.

Ask questions, then give the prospect tiered quotes based on the quality of the finish and paint expected. Get signed contracts that detail expectations and deliverables as well as interim payments. Seviour does that, and now hardly ever loses a bid. ■■■

action," says Seviour. "Pay attention if someone starts behaving differently with you."

Cranky Clients

In residential as in commercial, the big CCs, a.k.a. Cranky Clients, will always be an issue. Seviour remembers a client who marked every imperfection with green masking tape. Her charming 18-th century home had oodles of character, but it also had the imperfections typically associated with an older home's walls, baseboards, doorframes and window trim.

"She wanted the walls to be like glass and I hadn't allowed for that in the original quote," says Seviour, who now outlines deposits and interim payments in contracts. "Attaining that degree of perfection would have quadrupled the quote."

Since then, Seviour has made a point of discussing prospects' expectations upfront. As he chats with customers, he'll ask them how "perfect" they want the finish to be and he may give them several prices, based on the degree of preparation required to attain that finish.

Communication

Seviour has become a master communicator and makes sure clients, suppliers and sub-contractors know what to expect. For example, he tells Todd Watson, the Oakville Sherwin Williams store manager, what time he'll drop by to pick up an order. "He always calls and tells me if he'll be late," says Watson, who frequently refers Seviour because he's seen his work firsthand, knows that his attention to detail is extraordinary and that he paints every house as if it was his own. "He's considerate because knowing when he needs something helps me plan my day. It also means that if he needs something in a hurry, I'll get it ready for him because I know it's for real."

Even sweating through a steamy summer, Seviour loves the constant change and ongoing creative challenge, something he knows just wouldn't be the same if his bum were still stuck to a seat all day. "It took a while to get here, but I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be," says Seviour with a satisfied smile. ■■■