

Painter Profile





Wildely Successful

Dennis Wilde's one-stop-shop, one-man-band may be the ideal business model

By John Leckie

"At one point, I considered going to Europe to get my master painter's certification," says Dennis Wilde. The 46-year-old journeyman painter, who operates Dennis J. Wilde Painting & Decorating in Sylvan Lake, Alta., about 20 kilometres west of Red Deer, was hoping to follow in the footsteps of his boss, mentor and friend, Martin Scholz. The German-born Scholz, whose father was a master painter, was trained in, but never received, a master's certification.

So, it was to be with Wilde. Family and financial considerations kept Wilde in Alberta. He and his wife, Colleen, have three children, a 26-year-old daughter and a 21-year-old son, who are both married, and an 18-year-old daughter who is still living at home. "Here, the apprenticeship program is three years. It used to be four, but they changed it. Over there, it is like a doctorate. You study for seven years before you get your master painter's certificate."

Wilde prides himself on being able to do it all, applying the knowledge he picked up from Scholz during the 16 years he worked for him; and he laments the increasing specialization in the painting trade. "Since I started, the job has been chopped up into these compartments where you do this or you do that but you don't do it all. I know people who strictly do faux finishes or new houses. Not many people do outside painting anymore. I still do all of it."

Wilde didn't start out wanting to be a painter. He wanted to be a commercial artist. "In my zeal to get there,

I went from matriculation down to diploma so I could get out of school early, and, that year, they changed the entrance requirements so I needed matriculation to go the fine arts school so I never made it." Later, experience removed any regrets, though. "Friends of mine that did go wound up flipping burgers or selling real estate. Meanwhile, I got into painting, which can be a form of art, says Wilde."

It wasn't a completely straightforward trip, however. He says, "I started out trying to be a carpenter, but that was a miserable failure. Either my tape measure was too short or I couldn't read the darn thing. Then, I started dry-walling, but I soon discovered I didn't like getting covered in drywall dust." It was then that he and a buddy started painting houses one summer and he discovered that he liked it. He started his apprenticeship with a painter in Jasper, where he was living at the time.

After a year, he moved back to Sylvan Lake, where he had spent the early part of his life, and got a job with M. Scholz Painting & Decorating.

Scholz wasn't impressed with the training he had been given during that first year. "It wasn't done right," says Scholz. "It took a little bit to change it over." He also refused to accept the year of apprenticeship Wilde had put in while working in Jasper, which meant he had to do an extra year of apprenticeship before getting his journeyman's ticket. While he wasn't happy at the time, Wilde soon realized there was a lot he could learn from Scholz, and stuck with him after the apprenticeship was over. "I have never met anyone with the knowledge he has," Wilde says. "I tried to learn everything he knows but it wasn't possible. It would take a lifetime."

For his part, Scholz says Wilde was the employee he could count on to do that something extra needed on some jobs. "He never let me down," he says. Wilde worked for Scholz full-time until 1990, and part-time for three years after that while Scholz was winding down his business in preparation for retirement.

In 1995, Wilde went out on his own. "Mostly, now I work in higher-end homes because I like the challenge. These people have expectations and the challenge is to meet them. New homes are not the same, because everything is in such a rush. I find if I need two weeks

to do a job, I'll have six days."

That doesn't mean he avoids new homes entirely. "I do work for contractors, but only those I know aren't going to have eight trades in the house at one time. Most of them are high-end builders. I like to keep myself diversified. In the summertime, I like to go outside and do exteriors, and I do faux finishes and wallpaper. That was another thing Martin taught me—everything from foils through industrial heavy duty vinyl."

Foil wallpaper has essentially disappeared from the scene in the past 15 years and Wilde wasn't particularly sorry to see it go. "It was very difficult to use," he says. "It was kind of like putting the foil from a cigarette package on the wall. If you twist it wrong, it wrinkles. It was very unforgiving but

lonely way to work, but I thrive on the challenge of trying to get perfection out of each job. It hasn't happened yet, but I'm still trying."

Matt Toonders, owner of The Paint Stop in Sylvan Lake, where Wilde purchases most of his supplies, says Wilde works best with himself or with one other person. "It's hard to get the same quality of workmanship out of other people," Toonders says. "He sets pretty high standards and doesn't leave the project until that standard has been achieved. He is one of those guys who will go that extra mile and make sure the project is something he can be proud of."

Wilde says the desire for perfection, reinforced by Scholz, stems from his father's influence. "My dad always



if you got it on right, it looked really sharp." Unfortunately, during the '70s and early '80s, the place people wanted the foil wallpaper was in the bathroom. "That is the absolute worst room to be hanging wallpaper because of the toilets and cabinets and shower enclosures," Wilde says.

When he first started his own business, Wilde had as many as seven employees but he decided it was better to work on his own. "I don't think I am a very good boss," he says. "I am too high-strung and too fussy. After the third time of telling someone how to do something, I would get exasperated. I decided to forego building up a big painting company and just do what I can do myself. That is sometimes a

insisted that, if you were going to do a job, you do it right. Otherwise, you get out of the way so someone else can do it." Admirable as that seems, it caused some problems when Wilde started working on his own. "You can spend a long time trying to make it perfect but there is only so much good a hand can do. It took me a number of years to figure out that there is a point where you have to say, 'that is as good as I can get it,'" he says.

At the same time, settling for a mediocre job is not in the cards. "Something I used to tell the people who worked for me was that, if we can't do a better job than the people who hired us, they don't need us and we certainly shouldn't expect to get paid." Most of the 50 or

so jobs Wilde takes on in the year are in the Sylvan Lake area. Perhaps half a dozen or so are in Red Deer. When the Alberta economy was a little slower, he worked in both Edmonton and Calgary, which are each about an hour-and-a-half away, but he hasn't had to do that in a while.

Almost all of his jobs come by word of mouth, which means it is particularly important to keep customers happy. "One good job will easily get me four or five more," Wilde says. His favourite jobs are difficult repaints, with multiple colours and added challenges such as marbling a fireplace or shading doors. He also likes woodwork, and making it look like a variety of different things.

The one thing Wilde tries to avoid is getting stuck in a rut.

And he loves to work outside in the summer, even though many painters are shying away from that because they don't want to get stuck with the responsibility if the product fails, which is a legitimate concern, as the weather hasn't been co-operative in recent years.

"In the past couple of years, it rained so much we all got webbed feet. This year, I finished an outside that I started three years ago. It was awful. The cool thing about it, though, was that, when I finished, the people gave me a bonus, one of only two I have ever gotten."

Scheduling is usually not a problem for Wilde.

He says, "When I schedule with private individuals, I have the time set and I know generally how long it is going to take me and I add on a few days in case something goes wrong and each job follows the other." What throws a spanner in the works is when he takes on new houses. "They are always in an all-fired rush, so they'll say, 'I need you at the end of the month,' and then they'll call you on the 16th to say the house is ready for you, says Wilde."

While the new homes frequently cause him grief, he is not ready to give them up completely. "It's funny how fast you forget how to ride the bike", he says.

In his quest for diversity, Wilde covers most painting possibilities. He does

residential, commercial and light industrial work.

Wilde says, "I'm not set up to do heavy industrial because I don't have a sandblaster, even though I have been trained to sandblast. I also don't have a lift, which you need for work in the oil fields."

His preferred tools of the trade are a brush and roller. While he has spray equipment and confesses to having tried every gimmick, he prefers to stick to the basics on repainting jobs. "In new houses, I spray on the primer and the first finish coat, if it isn't multiple colours. If it is multiple colours, I spray on primer, only and then roll the walls out. I also spray the woodwork."

The reason he frequently shuns the sprayer is preparation time. He says, "If I was doing the ceiling in a mobile home, it would take me maybe four hours to poly off all the walls so I can spray the ceiling. In two hours, I could have the whole thing all rolled, so why would I want to spray?"

Wilde is also capable of carrying out what is becoming a lost art for painters—mixing his own paints. "I have a tinting colour rack that I use extensively. I just take it to the paint store and have them fill it up every once and a while. It comes in quite handy when you are two hours away on a job and you run out of paint. It's nice to be able to mix up another gallon, says Wilde."

Some aspects of painting have taken their toll. Early in his career, a mishap with two-component epoxy burned his sinuses and lungs. He had only received one of the two material safety data sheets for the product and did not use the right protective equipment. "You can protect yourself a lot better now because there is a lot more information out there," he says. "It wasn't so when I started painting. Even so, I know painters who are just silly and spray lacquer without masks. It's not that they don't know better—they just don't do it."

When using lacquers himself, Wilde uses disposable coveralls to minimize contact with his skin in addition to using a mask. While he loves making woodwork come alive with stains and lacquers, he finds it harder to do now.

He says, "As I get older, I am finding that the continual exposure to solvents and latex has made it difficult to breathe." The effects of that early mishap even have an impact on one

Five tips from veteran painter Dennis Wilde:

1. Make sure you really understand what your customer is asking for before you start working. A little time spent discussing the project beforehand can save a lot of repainting later.
2. Make sure the products you are recommending will actually do the job they are being asked to do. Be sure you understand the type of treatment the product will have to withstand.
3. Keep your job clean. If you leave materials lying around or you have music blasting away, the customer is not going to be comfortable having you there.
4. Dress like a professional, which, for a painter, means wearing white. Painters in T-shirts and jeans covered in the remnants of every job they have done this year do not create a good impression.
5. Watch your language. Letting loose with a string of profanity while working in someone's house is not likely to impress your customer.
6. Ultimately, it is all about presentation. "You want your customer to feel comfortable that they have hired you, to know that they have hired a professional. If the job is a mess and you look like a mess and you are talking like you just walked out of the woods, it doesn't matter how good a job you do, the customer is going to be uncomfortable until they get you out of the house."

of his hobbies, restoring and painting old cars.

He and his friend, Floyd Burke, who operates Floyd's Auto & Tractor Repair, restored a 1949 Ford pickup, where Burke handled the mechanical restoration and Wilde did the body work and the painting. "He figured it was a 10-year project," Burke says, "but we got it done in a year. We worked at it fairly steadily. It looked really nice when it was done. We did it all original. We don't hot rod them or anything."

When he is painting the restored vehicles, due to his sinus problems, Wilde does not put the hardener in the paint. "I can't really tolerate that," he says. "The finish hardens over time, but it isn't as hard as it might be at first." Waiting in the wings for the pair, who

my hand at the end," he says. "People are always really glad to see you until you give them the bill. Over the years, Wilde began to realize the importance of sitting down with the customer and getting a clear understanding of what he is looking for. Then, he creates a detailed proposal that outlines everything from the products to be used and the number of coats and then gives a price. There is even a place at the bottom for the customer to sign to make it a contract. "Even with a friend, it is nice to have it written down, so three weeks or two months down the road, when you finish the job, you can look at this thing and say, 'Yes, I actually did finish the job'," Wilde says.

The system has worked well because he has only had to file one lien in



Wilde's passion for painting extends to refinishing antique cars. Reclaiming this '49 Ford took Wilde and a friend a year of steady work.



both enjoy their work so much that they have made it their hobby as well, is the restoration of two vehicles dear to Burke's heart.

The first is the first car he ever owned, a 1926 Chevy (one of only 500 ever built, Wilde says), that he bought in 1952. "It has been sitting around for a while and is kind of deteriorated, but that's not much of a problem," Burke says. The other is a 1955 Chevy that he bought in 1963, when it had 33,000 miles on the odometer. It now has 890,000 miles on it. This one is almost ready for painting. "We've completely done it over," Burke says.

When it comes to his business, the one job that Wilde doesn't like is collecting money.

"If I was able, I would do the jobs for free, just so I wouldn't have to put out

his career. "The fellow had run out of money and he was going to have to remortgage his house", he says. "Because he needed more time, he told me he wasn't going to pay me." Unfortunately for him, he also said: "Besides, the paint job sucked. If you want your money, sue me." Wilde says "I wasn't going to go home and cry. I put a lien on his house." That meant the client couldn't remortgage it until his lawyer had cut Wilde a cheque for what he was owed. "I told him that all he had to do was tell me what he was doing and I would have waited two weeks," Wilde says. It is not something he wants to go through again.

He says, "Your ultimate goal is to have your customers satisfied and happy that the money they have spent was really worth it." ■■■