



# ITEMS

NEWSLETTER

April 2009

## Wixson Reflects On 47 Years at AB&I at March American Foundry Society Meeting



The year was 1962. John Kennedy was sending in the first of the American “advisors” to Viet Nam. The Supreme Court ruled that prayer in schools was unconstitutional. Alan Shepard held on tight and became the first American to orbit Earth. And Kip Wixson went to work for a bustling, dusty foundry in Oakland called AB&I.

A lot of iron has poured out of the bull ladle since those days. The foundry that grew out of the backyard of its founder, Joseph Boscacci, matured into the modern, safe, and clean manufacturing facility that it is today. But it didn’t just grow; it was pulled, pushed, and formed into the modern AB&I by a team of bright, gritty, tenacious people who made it their job to overcome obstacles, solve problems, and get the job done, no matter what.

That was the core message conveyed by Kip at the recent meeting of the American Foundry Society.

As AB&I emerged out of the turbulent 1980s and 90s as one of just three major American producers of cast iron soil pipe, people would often ask Kip how AB&I managed to survive and prosper when so many other foundries merged, sold out, or simply closed their doors. His answer was always the same, as it was at the AFS meeting this night.

“It’s our people.”

Kip went on to recall how it was AB&I’s people who stood in shock as the foundry they had worked so many decades to build burned to the ground. Before the ashes from this fire were even cold, those same people grabbed their hammers and saws and started rebuilding. What most in the industry say should

have been the end of AB&I turned out to be a moment that defined who AB&I really was – a team of dedicated people, in both white collars and blue, who rose to the occasion in truly spectacular fashion, putting the foundry back into operation in just three months. They said it couldn’t be done, but the people at AB&I did it.

Kip recalled several other examples of the AB&I team pulling rabbits out of hats, going the extra mile, struggling against the odds. It’s what the men and women of AB&I do. And it’s why AB&I is still going strong after more than a century in business.

Since joining the AB&I team some 47 years ago, Kip has seen the foundry’s trials and successes from the front row. “It’s never boring,” said Kip to the AFS audience, “and the work environment is just so enjoyable. It’s great when you feel that what you do is worth something every day.”

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## Perspective

# Let's Add Another Oxymoron to the Modern Dictionary: Financial Expert

For those of you with enough gray hair to remember George Carlin at his best, you'll recall that he popularized self-contradictory phrases like jumbo-shrimp, friendly-fire, holy-war, and military-intelligence. Well, I'm no Carlin, but if he were around today, I'm sure he'd add another to his list: financial-expert.

I grew weary of the suits on the Sunday morning business shows years ago. Four guys could sit around a table for an hour and shed absolutely no light on numerous topics of financial importance. Not that they didn't sound like they knew what they were talking about; they certainly did. It's just that when you looked at their predictions six or twelve months later and compared them with reality, a monkey with a dartboard could have hit the mark more often. The only thing any of these guys was good at was self-promotion. I'm sure more than a few viewers would tune in on Sunday and follow the disjointed advice of these stockbrokers/fund managers/flimflam men, buy their suggestions, and maybe even become clients of their respective firms.

You expect people with something to sell to disagree with each other, to pitch their ideas against the other guys'. That's what makes a market. What is starting to worry me, though, is the creeping realization that even our lofty leaders at the Federal Reserve and Treasury may not have a clue, either. Remember Greenspan saying that he did not think the real estate bubble would pop, that we were not over-leveraged? He favored easy money, to allow people to buy homes there was no way in hell they could pay for, but somehow felt things would all work out.

Ditto for Paul Volker, the Fed Chairman before Greenspan. Nobody saw the meltdown that was brewing until it was too late. Way too late.

Now we've got a Treasury Secretary who thinks spending \$3 trillion on Congressmen's pet projects is a good idea. Never mind that we don't have \$3 trillion, and that we have to borrow it from a country that is busy building missiles to take out our aircraft carriers.

This leader is spending like crazy, shoring up companies deemed "too big to fail," and taking over their board rooms in the process. But I have a question: what would happen if some of these companies did fail? I kind of get the need to bolster the financial institutions, so there are no runs on banks, and people can still use their credit cards to fill up their tanks. But, what about GM? What's the worst that could happen if GM went belly up and was forced to sell itself off in pieces? Would somebody buy the good brands, pare back production until demand was rebuilt, then meet that demand with better cars and trucks? I think they would. The company, or its daughters, would still function, would still make cars, and would be reorganized to take better advantage of the world market for vehicles when the economy turned around.

As it stands now, our leaders are spending us into a spiral from which there is simply no return. Nobody ever got rich spending money, and countries are no different.

I'm really beginning to understand what the guy meant when he said "nobody knows anything about anything." It's probably not quite that bad, but close. Our business leaders blew it, big time, and our politicians and financial wizards could be making things a whole lot worse. Or not. Only time will tell. I just wish George Carlin was still around to make me laugh.

I've been talking to reps all across the country for the past couple of weeks. I enjoy dealing with reps, as these are the folks in the trenches every day, slogging it out and making our distribution system work. The general consensus is that 2009 will be a slow year, all year. While we might see a little light toward the end of the fourth quarter, there is no likely prospect for a meaningful recovery until 2010. I trust these people more than I do the economists and experts, who pontificate about data they get second, third or fourth hand, sometimes from the very people I deal with every day. When my reps say plan for a slow second half, I plan for a slow second half.

The Obama stimulus plan could help, if it gets public- and private-sector building projects back on track. Or, it could hurt, by causing such inflation that nobody wants to start building anything for fear of what the final costs might be (see, I don't know anything either). I will go out on a limb, at least a little, by predicting that the road to recovery will be rocky and slow-going. I project that it will take us at least two years to return to solid ground, to get the economy growing again at the 3-4% pace we need to get people back to work and buying cars and houses again. So there, I fell into the trap and made a prediction. Now we'll see if I do better than that monkey.

Here's a bit of useful trivia I just came across. Have you ever rented a car, taken it to a gas station, and wondered what side the gas filler was on? Well, I have, and about half the time, I'm on the wrong side of the pump. Well, here's a tip. Look on the gas gauge inside the car, and find the little gas pump icon on that gauge. There is a little arrow on one side or the other of that icon, indicating which side the gas tank is on. Really, it's there. Check it out.

No charge.

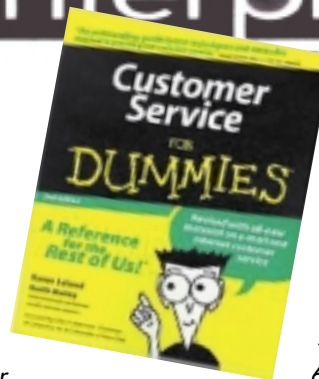
Keeping things going...

## **Eight Critical Customer Service Skills** Saying "thank you" is just not enough

Many people know that Enterprise Rent-A-Car is the largest car rental company in the world. What most people don't know, however, is that it is a privately-owned company doing over \$9 billion a year in business.

When asked what the key to their success is, Enterprise execs will point to the importance of customer service, and to choosing the right employees in building their service-oriented teams. According to the book, *Exceeding Customer Expectations*, when Enterprise hires new people, they "don't want people who merely seek to be behind the rental counter. They want every candidate to aspire to greatness."

To help identify the best candidates, Enterprise uses an eight-point *Critical Customer Service Skills* checklist. Only those candidates who score well on this checklist are considered for employment. The system works – in the high-turnover business of car rental, Enterprise manages to retain 70% of its full-time people, maintaining a ready pipeline of qualified employees to take on increasing responsibility as the company grows.



The eight critical customer service skills identified by Enterprise are:

1. A passion for taking care of customers;
2. A willingness to be flexible;
3. A work ethic based on dedication to the company and its mission;
4. An eagerness to learn a new business and work their way up;
5. Self motivation and goal orientation;
6. Persuasive sales skills;
7. Excellent communication skills;
8. Leadership ability.

Enterprise employees are empowered to do whatever it takes to give the customer a good car-rental experience. One customer reported that her rental of a 15 passenger van was discounted by at least 50% when the employee learned it was for hurricane relief. "I didn't ask that they do it," she said, "and the woman who helped me didn't have to ask the manager, she just did it. That kind of freedom makes them more likely to serve the customer's best interest, which ultimately results in the company's best interest."

### **Distributors, Contractors Urged to Look for the CISPI Mark on All Cast Iron DWV**

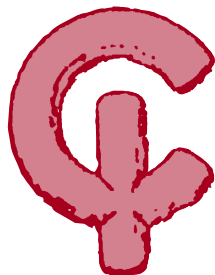
The Cast Iron Soil Pipe Institute (CISPI) is the leading industry organization responsible for establishing standards for cast iron pipe and fittings in America. All leading domestic producers of cast iron DWV are members of the Institute, and all support their efforts

at ensuring product quality and public safety.

"We cannot overemphasize the importance of verifying that all cast iron material on a jobsite carry the CISPI mark," said AB&I's Gary Wickham. "It really is the only way of ensuring that the material meets all standards."

The CISPI mark carries even more weight with the recent certification of the CISPI

inspection program by NSF, an independent, third party agency charged with monitoring product quality.



### **Attention Distributors: Please Send Your Contact Information**

We're still adding to the "Where to Buy" section of our website, but need distributor info to make this a truly useful section for buyers. If you have not yet sent us your email and internet address, please take a moment and do so now.

This "Where to Buy" section will list all distributors by state and city, so could be a good source of new business.

Please provide your email address and web address (if you have a website) by emailing our webmaster at [woodbury@volcano.net](mailto:woodbury@volcano.net). Your information will be quickly posted to our website.



## Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Easter

Think you know what Easter is all about? Bet you don't. Consider this.

Eggs and rabbits as Easter symbols come from ancient times. Eggs have represented new life and resurrection for centuries. Because rabbits and hares are known to be so fertile, they have long been associated with the fertility of spring.

Easter always falls between March 22 and April 25, after the first full moon following the first day of spring.

The word Easter comes from 'Eastre' or 'Eostre,' the Anglo Saxon goddess of the dawn. In pagan times, a festival was held in her honor.



The decorating of Easter eggs varies from culture to culture. In Greek Orthodox culture, eggs are painted red to symbolize the blood of Christ. In Germany and Austria, eggs are painted green. Slavic peoples paint eggs gold and silver.

Easter baskets are the result of a Catholic custom, where baskets filled with ham, cheese and bread were brought to mass so the priest could bless the ingredients.

Egg rolling has religious roots, too, based on the rolling away of the boulder from Christ's tomb.

The holiday of Easter, as celebrated today, is a commemoration of Christ's resurrection, yet has its early roots in ancient traditions. So now you know.

### Just for Fun...

#### Lyrics That Changed with the Times..

Some of the artists of the 60s are revising their hits with new lyrics to accommodate aging baby boomers.

Herman's Hermits: "Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Walker"



Ringo Starr: "I Get By With a Little Help from Depends"



The Bee Gees: "How Can You Mend a Broken Hip?"

Bobby Darren: "Splish, Splash I Was Havin' a Flash"

Johnny Nash: "I Can't See Clearly Now"

Paul Simon: "Fifty Ways to Lose Your Liver"

Marvin Gaye: "Heard it Through the Grape Nuts"

Procol Harem: "A Whiter Shade of Hair"

The Temptations: "Papa's Got a Kidney Stone"

Abba: "Denture Queen"

Helen Reddy: "I am Woman, Hear Me Snore"

Willie Nelson: "On the Commode Again"



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#### "Geeze, I Wish I Didn't Say That..."

"Whenever I watch TV and see those poor starving kids all over the world, I can't help but cry. I mean, I'd love to be skinny like that, but not with all those flies and death and stuff."



*Mariah Carey*



"Smoking kills, and if you're killed, you've lost a very important part of your life."

*Brooke Shields*

"I've never had major knee surgery on any other part of my body."

*Winston Bennett*

"Outside of the killings, Washington has one of the lowest crime rates in the country."

*Mayor Marion Barry*

"That lowdown scoundrel deserves to be kicked to death by a jackass, and I'm just the one to do it."

*Congressional Candidate in Texas*



"I love California. I practically grew up in Phoenix."

*Dan Quayle*