

Building for Future Generations: Tom and Jim Pientka  
Business Watch Article by Karen Ostrov, PhD  
February 2005

[PLANNING Design Build](#) is one of the leading commercial design-builders in Wisconsin. President Tom Pientka oversees the design division and his brother, Jim, is executive vice president and in charge of construction. There's also a third Pientka brother at the helm—Ken is chief operations officer, having joined the company after spending 25 years with Commonwealth Edison in Chicago as a mechanical engineer.

In 2004 the Pientkas celebrated their tenth year of ownership of PLANNING Design Build. There were about 25 employees at Planning Associates when it was purchased by the Pientkas in 1994. Today there are 115 employees in the disciplines of architecture, engineering, interior design, and construction project management. Last year PLANNING Design Build generated about \$75 million in revenues. The company has built 15 buildings in Old Sauk Trails Park; repeat customers include John Livesey, George Gialamas, and Todd Nelson.

**BW: Tell us a little bit about your background.**

Tom Pientka (TP): We grew up in Park Ridge, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, near O'Hare. Our father was a structural engineer who started his own family business in the 1950s, performing structural engineering design work. Our mother was also employed in the business. There were six of us kids and we all worked for our father at one time or another. Without question, our parents were responsible for our strong work ethic.

My first job was for my father as a laborer pouring concrete. I was 15 at the time and really hated the work in the beginning—the hours were long. That's where we learned to work hard and follow through. Our folks were very hard-working people and did what they could to put us all through college.

I received my civil engineering degree from UW-Platteville and then worked summers on various construction jobs in Chicago. We rehabbed a ten-mile section of the Eisenhower Expressway. While the work was good, the neighborhood was not. Hearing gunshots every day made me wonder if I was in the right job. Soon after this, I found work with Planning Associates in Madison.

Jim Pientka (JP): I attended Northern Illinois University for two years before deciding to change gears and learn the carpentry trade. It was during this hands-on training that I really developed a love of construction.

**BW: Sometimes brothers fight tooth and nail. How do you guys get along?**

TP: Really well, actually. Jim, Ken and I are quite different from each other with our own very different styles. While attending a seminar at the UW School of Business, the instructor suggested trying a business advisor—which turned out to be tremendous advice. About three years ago we began working with [Karen Ostrov of Konec Consulting](#). Karen blends the art of psychology with business. She's really done a great job in helping us understand how we individually process information, which has vastly improved our communication. Retaining a business advisor is one of the smartest things we have done for our business. We are thrilled to be continually improving our communication and management skills with Konec.

**BW: What is the best-kept secret about PLANNING Design Build?**

TP: The first that comes to mind is our integrated design/build capabilities. Only 10% of the design/build contractors in the world operate in an integrated fashion, where the architect and builder are all under one roof, part of the same company. This increases efficiency and communication, which can help lower the overall cost of building projects.

JP: The second is our expertise in waterparks. PLANNING Design Build constructed Great Wolf Lodge and parts of the Wilderness Hotel & Waterpark. We designed and built all of Kalahari Resort in the Dells and are now doing their flagship Kalahari Resort in Ohio. We are on the cutting edge of waterpark design, which keeps getting bigger and more complex. PLANNING Design Build has built more indoor waterparks than anyone else in the country. An incredible amount of 3-D modeling goes into designing an indoor waterpark, especially with slides, supports, lighting, HVAC ducts and structure above ground and the complicated piping systems below ground. Water quality control and ventilation systems also require extra attention in these corrosive environments.

**BW: PLANNING Design Build is also a leader in sustainable design—environmentally friendly, green buildings. What's the big advantage of "going green?"**

TP: It is obvious to us that, at the rate we are going, we cannot replenish the earth's resources we are consuming. What will be left for our children? We can make substantial impacts on reducing energy and pollution by being better designers. We can conserve resources and reduce operating costs dramatically through a variety of methods, including daylighting and improved glazing systems, which help cut cooling loads, which in turn reduces electricity consumption.

The [LEED program](#) (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a green-building rating system designed by the U.S. Green Building Council. LEED-certified buildings are highly energy efficient and environmentally friendly. Several years ago we spent

substantial time designing and bidding out a LEED-certified sister building to the TomoTherapy Building. This exercise showed that you can build a LEED-Certified, Class-A building for about \$1/square foot more than a standard building would cost. For the added long-term benefit, that's not a lot of money compared to the overall cost of the project.

JP: Energy costs for most standard Class-A buildings are about \$1.25 to \$1.40/square foot/year. A LEED-certified building will run at about \$1 to \$1.25/square foot.

BW: What are some of the core business philosophies you have used in growing your company?

JP: Customer service and quality. If you build good products and stand behind them, this will lead to more work, repeat clients, and lifelong relationships. We have a very strong commitment to warranty and don't cut corners.

TP: Be organized. Be prepared. Work hard and play hard. Most of all, take care of your people and reward them as much as you can. We try to empower employees to make decisions and keep an open-door policy where anybody can talk to us at any time. Ken has helped us a lot in developing this approach.

JP: We also stay on top of what the industry pays and offer at-market or slightly above market wages and benefits. Our building provides an excellent work environment which helps in employee hiring and retention. We also sponsor many company get-togethers to provide stress relief and promote friendships.

**BW: What is a typical workday like?**

TP: I don't think there is any such thing as a typical workday. We work long hours, about 12 hours a day. I travel a lot on the road. I will often work nights and partial weekends

JP: Each job is a new challenge. It is very satisfying to see people grow in what they do. What I dislike most about our work is the number of meetings. Some weeks are nonstop meetings. On those weeks it seems like there is little room for breathing, or for taking time to visit with people during work.

TP: I also learn from the businesses of our clients. It's rewarding to help owners solve their unique problems by coming up with design solutions and then bring it to life in terms of a finished building.

**BW: Construction is a very cost-competitive industry. How do you stay on top of things?**

It's important to stay on top of market conditions and costs. One way of keeping costs down is not overdesigning the large and small components of a project. Also, we're growing our business very carefully. Over the last ten years we have gone from about 20 employees to 120. It is a continual challenge to find the right people, especially in this competitive market.

JP: For the right client, we're happy to travel. We have a unique product and delivery system, which we are very proud of. As more and more companies try to duplicate what we do, we must stay ahead of them by constantly evolving our product and making it better.

**BW: There has been a lot of discussion about how Madison is not business-friendly. How tough is it to get projects under way?**

If there is one thing that should change, it's the approval process. It has become way too cumbersome. We find too much variation in requirements among the various state agencies, counties, and municipalities. We encounter numerous people who are authorized to review and comment on designs, without having even a basic understanding of architecture and construction. The decisions they make are often shortsighted and not beneficial for the community or the environment.

**BW: What is your best piece of business advice?**

"Go big or stay home." It means when you get up in the morning, make the best day of it you can. Don't bring you baggage to work, make a positive impact in the world today. Life is too short to stay on the sideline, get in the game.

---

**Who** Jim Pientka

**Hometown** Park Ridge, IL

**Family** Two children, Jack and Jessica

**Favorite local restaurant** [Johnny Del Monico's](#)

**Favorite movie** The Godfather

**Most recent book** The Godfather Returns

**Interests/hobbies** Golfing, boating, college sports

**Most important career experience** Buying our company

**Something that always makes you laugh** Seinfeld

**Greatest obstacle overcome** Every time we have expanded the business

**Best-kept secret in Madison** [Eno Vino](#)

**Favorite charities** [Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Dane County](#), [Second Harvest](#)

[Close Window](#)