

Transforming Chicago From Above ProFile: David Welte

By *Christa Youngpeter*

Starting an entirely new venture on April 1 may seem like a fool's errand, but in 2008, David Welte, president of GreenPROChicago, Inc., took a leap and hasn't looked back. After 25 years in corporate advertising, he moved to coatings. He's been steadily spreading green roofs throughout the Chicagoland area ever since.

His niche didn't come overnight, though. After leaving the corporate world, Welte started as a painting contractor working primarily on the north shore of Chicago, following his lifelong hobby of carpentry and painting.

Welte found that being a "jack of all trades" in residential painting didn't lead to much success, and, in fact, led to a lot of work and stress and little success. His lesson learned helped him pivot exclusively to coatings. "Once you're in a niche market, that's where you can become the expert," he said. "I also wanted to become more environmentally friendly, so coatings appealed to me since they were operationally more efficient and had less of an environmental impact compared to house paint. And I do something that's very unique."

Educating Customers

When Welte started in 2008, he only knew of one or two elastomeric and acrylic systems. He got trained on them, but eventually transitioned to silicone products. "It was a lot of trial and error to see which ones worked for what projects, and now I use seven to eight systems," Welte explained. "I'm always trying to become more efficient."

When Welte first started, it took

three weeks for him to complete an 8,000-square-foot (743.2 m²) roof project. Six years later, a 50,000-square-foot (4,645.2 m²) project took him the same amount of time thanks to a little help from some special tools — a high pressure pump and larger rollers.

Welte's business is 95 percent commercial, covering mostly large retailers, hotels, car dealerships, and service bays. He credited a combination of word of mouth, manufacturer representative recommendations, referrals, cold calling, and mail campaigns to this success. His experience in the advertising industry has helped him to know the best avenues to generate business. "I like to be imaginative and think outside the box about how can that benefit the customer," he explained of his approach to selling roof coating systems.

To Welte, educating people and helping them understand other options is key as well. "They think, 'Ugh it's green, which means expensive,' but a green coated roof actually costs a third of a traditional tear off and replace project," according to Welte, who said that when projects are based on square footage, coating a roof can be 60 percent less than the cost of a full tear off. "It's a big educating process since people don't really think of it and they just keep patching rather than replacing or coating," he said.

Welte uses a fact sheet to further educate his busy customers. It includes bullet points on durability, maintenance costs, and environmental benefits. "I explain that it's a maintenance item rather than capital expenditure." He shared another tip: He explains to customers about "the

importance of reflectivity and the code requirements for white roofs going forward to eliminate Chicago's 'heat island.'"

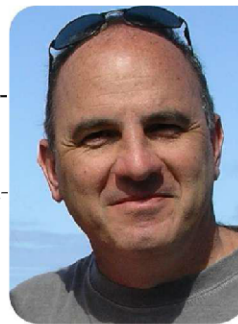


Photo courtesy of GreenPROChicago, Inc.

Core Crew

To a new applicator starting in the field of coatings, Welte offered some advice: "Focus on what you really want to do and what you can contribute to your customer. Enter the field gradually and do as much as you can on your own." Welte's painting company went from 0 to 14 employees in just two weeks, causing major growing pains. "Start small and grow gradually, and understand your market without taking too many detours," Welte added. He's parlayed that experience to his coatings company, too. "In coatings now, the application process is much easier with a smaller team."

Now, Welte employs just one full-time and one temporary worker on his team. The ease of spray or roller applications has helped him to minimize costs and maximize profits.

Building an Understanding

With work in the coatings industry, Welte can create his own schedule and focus on how to move forward by getting more projects. "Overall, I've found it to be an interesting field full of new products and new approaches," he concluded. "I'm still trying to get to know everyone, but the products and life cycles are similar, so start to know one, and you'll get to know the others." **CP**