

ICON Building Systems

By Stefan Schumacher

A high-tech metal building supplier with a human touch

ICON Building Systems, Seguin, Texas, is not your typical company. There are no bosses or managers, and many of the employees had no knowledge of the metal building industry prior to working there. The CEO often wears shorts, flip-flops and a baseball cap to work.

The unorthodox setup, however, has not hurt business. A technology company (first) that sells metal buildings, ICON has grown 60 percent annually since 2000. It supports hundreds of dealers and private labels and thousands of customers both in the United States and abroad. The company, which claims to be the first pre-engineered metal building supplier to develop a free software system giving customers the ability to design and price virtually any building in minutes, expects to generate \$35 to 40 million in sales this year.

It's a far cry from the two-car garage the business started in, where an old Ford tractor was used as a makeshift forklift. It was in the early days of ICON's existence that 37-year-old founder Mark Moore went on



ICON Building Systems CEO and Founder Mark Moore's philosophy involves putting health and happiness above work.

a mission to build an e-commerce system that would design buildings anywhere, at any price. With some help from his brother,

a computer programmer who passed away a few years ago, Moore believes the system he created sets the company apart.

At www.metalbuildingdepot.com, you can download (for free) a software program called IQS, which allows users to design and price an array of PEMB box buildings, including airplane hangars.

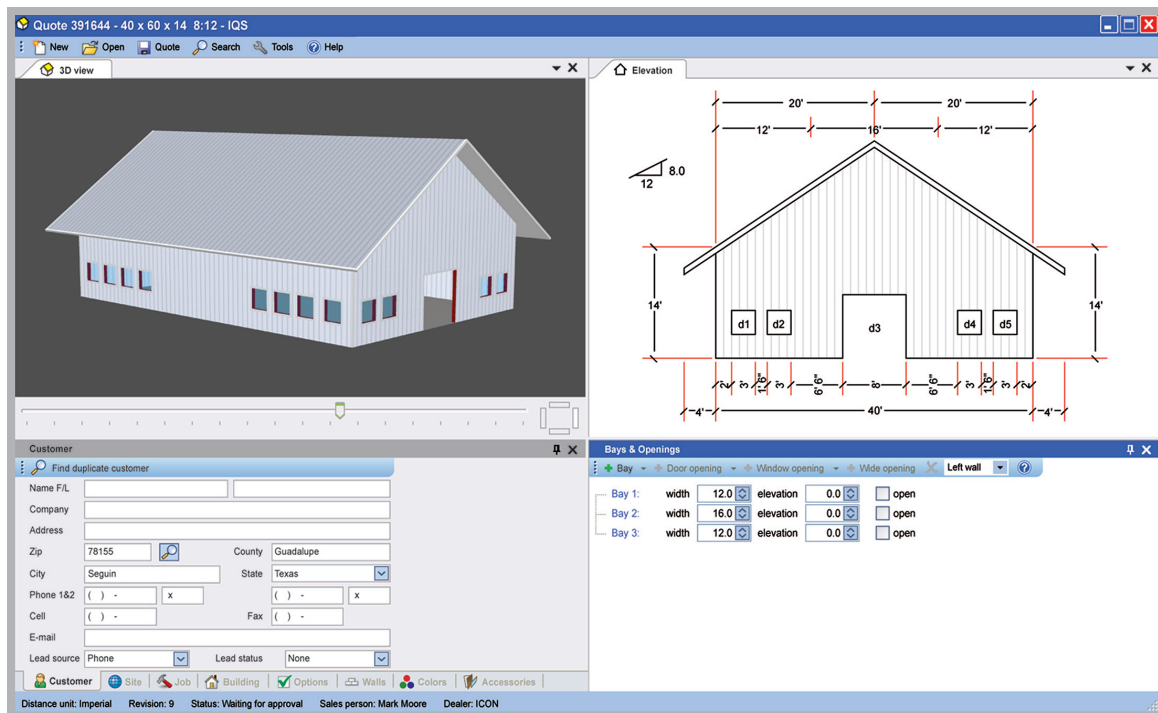
"Big ones, small ones, 50,000 square feet [4,645 m²], 100,000 square feet [9,290 m²], whatever you want," Moore said. "Once an order is placed, you go through the design, detailing and the building is delivered to their job site—all the materials needed to build."

Moore says 60 percent of ICON's customers are contractors and the rest are people who want a building for their backyard. ICON's biggest projects have been factory applications of more than 100,000 square feet. For larger projects, they also do business outside the U.S.

"We are the Google or Microsoft of the metal building [industry]," Moore said. "They



ICON allows you to design an array of metal buildings, including airplane hangars.



ICON believes its free design software is one of a kind.

don't have anything that's better. Most of them don't even have a system. It's a lot of paper and Post-it Notes. Our sales guys manage over 500 customers at a time."

Internally, the 25 to 30 employees at ICON handle everything through an intricate

chat system of instant messages, and Moore said customers receive feedback within seconds when they have questions.

"Everything is digital, everything is hyper-efficient," he said. "There's a ton of stuff that completely makes us totally unique.

We're not normal. Take any metal building company out there, and go 180-degrees from what they do and you'll find us."

Along with its focus on technology (the chief information officer is an MIT graduate), there's a human side to ICON's operation. Free lunch is served every day, incentives are given for quitting smoking and losing weight, and there is a history of hiring married couples.

"Every person that works here is part of how much better we are than the next guy. Everybody is very neutral and harmonious. We have the ability to do untold amounts of work," Moore said. "I look at other businesses and I've seen the way that they run them, and they're militaristic. This may sound stupid or weird, but there's no love. It's hard, and it's cold. I'm the anti-corporate guy, I wear shorts to work. I want people to be comfortable."

Moore's philosophy seems to be that if he can help his employees grow as people and give them a work environment they enjoy, the company will run more efficiently and, thus,



have more success. He claims he rarely looks at financial statements and instead focuses on the best way to get things done.

It may sound a bit touchy-feely, but Moore's approach is rooted in personal experience. His mother died of lung cancer, and he lost a brother "because he was overweight and he sat in front of a computer and programmed."

"From that day forward I decided that a person's health is number one, a person's happiness is number two, everything else falls behind that," he said of the impact his brother's passing had on him. "Work is 50 percent of everyone's life. If you're respected and treated right, you're going to do what you need to do better and you're going to want to get things done. My motivation is to help somebody realize they can have more out of life."

In one instance, Moore was out to eat and he recruited his waitress to come work for the company because she offered him onions and bell peppers for his beef tips.

"I said, 'absolutely not. I would rather eat hair.'" Despite passing on the onions and bell peppers, he said he saw something in that waitress. "When she came back to the table I

handed her my business card."

When Moore found out she smoked, he offered her \$1,000 to quit, and another \$1,000 for every year she didn't smoke after that.

It's not what you would call standard practice, but ICON likes to "roll our own." There is a do-it-ourselves mentality to the operation.

"We make our own Christmas cards," Moore noted. "I would rather hire someone to perform a task and then be a part of what we're doing than to farm it out."

As the company was growing in the late 1990s, there was a realization that they didn't have the tools bigger companies had.

The company's solution was to make the tools. According to Moore, the company built jigs, clamps, a CNC plasma cutter from scratch and even a 70-foot- (21-m-) long auto-welder.

If there's anything they can reuse, the people at ICON are "relentless" about recycling.

"I have people bring their trash from home,"

Moore said. "It's not about tree-hugger, but why throw it in a landfill? Take two seconds ... and it will go somewhere good instead of going somewhere where it's useless."

The recycling, the free lunch, the people-first philosophy and the high-tech day-to-day operations are all what seem to make ICON more of an overall experience than just a company. Whether or not any of that makes a difference

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to the customers is up to them. But Moore insists his company is a cut above, both because of what they offer and who they are.

"If you download the [IOS] program and go to every other metal building Web site on earth, there's absolutely nothing else out there

like this. Our key customers love this software. We have our own data center, full IT staff.

"I ask people what's your perception of this job, and they say, 'It's not a job, it's my life. I couldn't stand the thought of not being able to come here.' It's the culture, it's the environment." MCN

ICON's engineers designed their new 13,000-square-foot (1,208-m²) office building, which is currently under construction.

