

Investing in Quality

By Kay Borden

Training center helps movers prevent claims

The Kuhn brothers, Chuck (left) and Steve, have their sights set on the future of JK Moving & Storage.

Inside a dark warehouse in northern Virginia, a tidy, two-story house seems to await the return of a young family. Next door, connected to the house by a sidewalk painted on the warehouse floor, a single-story office appears deserted for the weekend. A trailer sits out front both buildings that—except for the missing cab and wheels—gives every indication it's moving day.

But it's not. Like some Hollywood set, the house, office and truck are only props movers use to learn their trade.

As executive vice president of JK Moving & Storage, Steve Kuhn says his company's new training center will help employees achieve and maintain a high level of consistent service, a top priority at this Sterling, Va., company. What was the inspiration to build the training facility?—"customer service, claims prevention and consistent service from all employees in every possible situation," he says. "It has always been our goal to have crews carry out all the services we promote and customers expect." In its commitment to consistency, JK promises its residential customers the same crew end to end.

The house in the training center is fully furnished, complete with dishes in the cabinets and toys in the kid's room. The two-room office simulates an executive suite, including file cabinets and a copier. The truck holds a conventional complement of new moving equipment, a temporary loan from New Haven Moving Equipment. Nestled strategically in what is known as the Dulles Corridor, the facility is an hour west of downtown Washington, D.C. The 260,000 square feet of warehouse and office space, including the new training center, illustrates what the right 17-year-old can do with \$500.

That's all Kuhn's younger brother, Charles, needed to get started in 1979. Today, as president and chief executive

officer, Chuck manages the company's 300 full-time employees, its fleet of more than 100 trucks, and a booming 25-percent-a-year growth rate. To meet the need, classrooms overlooking the training center were recently added, and construction of more warehouse space will begin soon.

Treating employees and customers right

Chuck has a knack for business success, and a string of awards to prove it. The seventh-largest independent mover in the country operates by a simple philosophy: Invest in quality people. The approach won Chuck and JK the Entrepreneur of the Year award in 1996 for a greater Washington service business, Small Business of the Year in 1997 from the Loudoun County (Va.) Chamber of Commerce, and last year's Blue Diamond "Quality First" Award, which recognizes "high quality customer service above and beyond industry standards." JK won the award due largely to its 98 percent claims-free performance in 1999, an achievement 200 percent below the national average for damage claims in the industry. JK didn't grow its business handling damage claims—it grew by getting rid of them.

"We teach our employees that the value of being trained, professional movers is it makes their job easier and safer and makes the customer happy,"

Kuhn says. "A satisfied customer means repeat business and referrals, which means more hours, money and profit sharing."

Profit sharing and pensions are rarities in the moving industry, but JK socks 25 percent of its earnings into employee profit-sharing plans. A poster near the break room dramatically illustrates what a career at JK could mean: a more-than-comfortable \$1.8 million at retirement for an employee who starts at age 25.

JK is serious about attracting and keeping quality people. For the effort, a whopping 85 percent of its business comes from referrals. Promoting employees from within becomes possible. Take Richard Houser, for instance. He began working for JK nine years ago as a helper. Today, he's the trainer and quality-assurance manager.

Training the trainers

The paint on the training center was practically still wet in April when JK threw open the doors to Ed Katz, founder of the International Office Moving Institute (IOMI), for two intensive days of training to damage-proof an office move. JK considers Katz and the

Cartersville, Ga.-based IOMI its greatest outside training resource for promoting damage-free office moves. "We found these methods to be the safest for our customers and employees, and it's by far the most efficient way for our customers to relocate," Kuhn says.

To kick things off right, New Haven loaned the center new furniture blankets, dollies, logistics straps and machine carts, and sent in its operations manager, Mike Luczak, for the inaugural event. On day one, Katz trained the trainers. JK's driver's lounge became a classroom for about 30 supervisors. All reported for Sunday morning school in full uniform. Employees were paid and fed both days and, as testimony to Chuck's family-run business practices, attendees genuinely appeared to welcome the opportunity. It was clear after the second day they all enjoyed the experience.

Katz taught his students simple but powerful methods for handling crew problems for minimal negative impact on the ultimate goal: getting the job done on time, without injury and without damage. He helped the supervisors-in-training learn how to strike a balance between being responsible and


being one of the crew. Using role-playing, Katz placed his students in situations of varying degrees of difficulty. He taught them how to handle real-world excuses, back talk and belligerence. He taught them techniques for getting crew members to work where they are most needed—

despite what may not seem fair at the moment. He taught them how to communicate problems to the customers. He taught them dignity and control by respect.

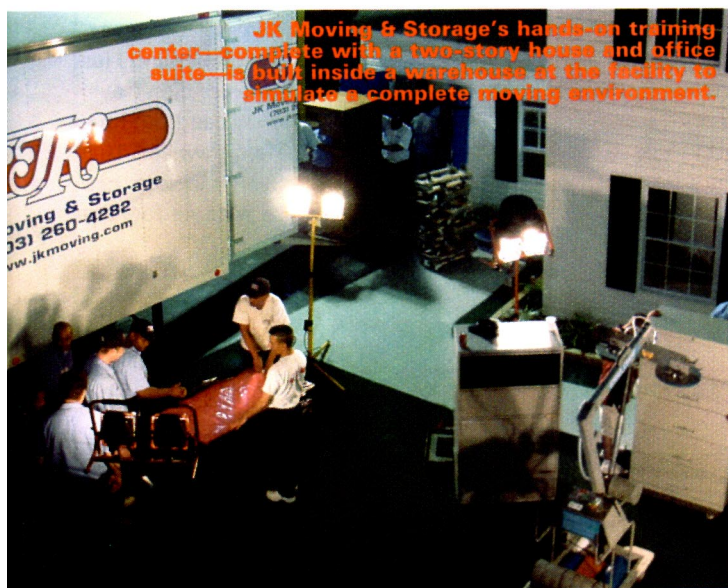
For day two, attendees from the previous day plus about 20 more movers broke into five groups to practice Katz's damage-proofing techniques in the hands-on training center. Kris Smurda, operations manager, rotated the groups through each training station throughout the day. One session was dedicated to blanket-wrapping a desk and pushing it up the truck ramp. At the office, one group was shown how to install doorway protectors while another practiced putting down Masonite, PathRite, Koroflex and door-jamb protectors to shield floors and walls. At one training station, a group of movers learned how to load and stretch-wrap computers on a machine cart. Still another crew safely moved fully loaded lateral file cabinets.

No accident

Something else happened that day. The spirit of friendly competition grew among the crew members as a group practiced preparing a desk. As each took his turn, the level of speed and skill used to stretch-wrap the desk raised the bar for the one who followed. When the final turn was made and the squeaking stretch-wrap snapped at the end of the roll, the group members cheered.

It's no accident JK Moving & Storage has fewer damage claims than the national average, and it's no fluke it has a stable full of satisfied customers and a history of strong growth. Instead of learning to handle claims, Chuck chose to be different. His company attracts employees by offering high-value incentives such as profit sharing and pensions. The Kuhns tell good people what they want, train them well, trust they will do their best, and the results exceeds expectations. The long-term, sustained payoff takes the form of good customer service and an exemplary damage-claims rate. 

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JK Moving & Storage's hands-on training center—complete with a two-story house and office suite—is built inside a warehouse at the facility to simulate a complete moving environment.



Seminar instructor Ed Katz (second from right) sets up a role-playing situation for potential supervisors in the driver's lounge turned classroom at JK Moving & Storage.