

What's Next For Al Ross?

Al, before we start talking about your current businesses, tell us how you got started.

BY RAY HANKAMER

AR: From a fairly young age, I was fascinated by the interworking of the business world; however, I was also captivated by aviation. My focus in college was aviation administration which then evolved into aircraft engineering. Even so, the need to earn extra money in college ignited in me the basics of business: I bought nice – looking watches at a low price, marked them up, and sold them on campus at a profit of \$20-30 per watch. Wow! That was the start of my love for the business world.

After college, I was hired as a salesperson by US Signs, a full-service, nationwide sign company. I spent two years in the business and experienced a great deal of success, then decided to take the risk and venture out on my own. With a wealth of knowledge and a \$200 investment, I started National Signs which is now one of the leading sign fabrication and installation companies in Southeast Texas.

RN: How did you differentiate yourself from competitors, when you started so small?

AR: Being small has great advantages. When you have a handful of clients, you focus on making them deliriously happy. Providing a high level of service to every client, exceeding their expectations, and a burning desire to succeed were the main ingredients for our success. Within a short period of time, I had clients like Dave & Busters with locations nationwide. We provided their signage for all of their locations, local, national and eventually international. That was a huge differentiator as well.

RN: Al, many of our commercial real estate readership know you as owner of National Signs, and now we see you are the new owner of Windrose Land Surveying, a long-

time fixture on the Houston surveying scene. How did that come about?

AR: Good question! After growing National Signs from a small operation to the leading sign company in Texas, I was restless to take on a new challenge. One of the challenges I experienced during my time at National Signs was that of building a custom home for my family. During this painful time, I realized the opportunity in the marketplace to make this experience pleasant, versus distressful, for home buyers. When the opportunity to sell National Signs came about, I sold the company and started a high-end residential spec-home building company. Currently we have 3 homes under construction in River Oaks, all of which are under contract already!

When I was made aware that Windrose might be available for purchase, and I have relationships with a good number of commercial real estate folks due to my years in the sign industry, I liked the idea that those same people also need the services offered by Windrose. I felt it was a good match.

Also I saw the opportunity to expand statewide, possibly through organic growth or acquisitions in major markets such as Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin. Currently, Windrose has about 40% of the surveying business in Houston, so there is a lot of room to grow in our own backyard first.

RN: Are you thinking about continuing to add companies to your portfolio, and amp them up?

AR: Absolutely! Wherever the opportunity shows itself! For example, there are many family-owned businesses that provide a good living for the owners, and have for many years. With a new partner with a new



perspective, typically there still exists a huge upside for growth for those companies. I would like to be the partner that helps propel that growth.

RN: Are there some bits of advice to give to our young commercial real estate professionals who are just starting out?

AR: Yes. Be aware of and accept your strengths but also be aware of your weaknesses. Confront both and plan around them, adjusting to the realities of your particular marketplace. Sales and marketing are key components to success, and reliability is foremost. Your clients need to know they can absolutely depend on you to take care of their needs.

I would like to point out and to even emphasize how wonderful a business atmosphere we have here in Houston. There are few barriers to achieving success if you really want it, unlike other cities where success is less merit-based. There is no other city with the entrepreneurial spirit like we have here in Houston! Have a clear vision. Never be satisfied with the status quo. Always keep your ideas for success in the forefront of your thinking.

RN: In your leisure time – what do you do for fun?

AR: I work out, and spend time with my family. But frankly, my work is my play! ●

