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Bracken Engineering builds on forensic expertise

Engineering firm grows brick by brick

Premium content from Tampa Bay Business Journal by Margaret Cashill, Staff Writer

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TAMPA — Bracken Engineering is preparing to expand outside Tampa Bay by opening an office in Fort Lauderdale in early 2011.

The structural engineering firm has its sights set on opening an office in Jacksonville in 2012 and another in Atlanta in 2013.

The firm, which provides forensic engineering, investigations and restoration, often works on properties affected by disasters such as hurricanes, fires and sinkholes. It also offers professional assessments and expert witness testimony.

Company President [William Bracken](#) said the planned expansion is an effort to meet client demand. His business model is tied to location, as his clients are based around the state, throughout the Southeast and beyond. Employees travel frequently and the company even keeps a small private plane at Peter O. Knight Airport.

"The decision had to be made to grow geographically first or to grow services first," Bracken said. "My decision was to grow geographically."

A satellite office will begin with one or two employees. Bracken is scouting out office space to lease.

To the next level

When Bracken founded the firm in 1996, he was the sole employee. He worked from his home for a year and a half until around the time he hired a third employee, when he moved to an office downtown.

After several years in an office off Waters Avenue, Bracken purchased a 26,000-square-foot building off Busch Boulevard about four years ago. The firm now occupies 6,000 square feet on the second floor and rents the first floor to tenants.

Bracken formed management company Conách LLC to run the property.

Two sizes of companies are most prevalent in the engineering industry, Bracken said. The one- to five-person firm may have a low overhead and be able to take on different types of projects; firms with 30 to 60 employees can run multiple offices, take on various disciplines and have a large client roster.

Bracken currently has 25 employees and is preparing to climb to the next level.

The number of small engineering firms has decreased with the economic downturn, said Frank Rudd, executive director of Florida Engineering Society, a professional association based in Tallahassee with 20 chapters around the state including Tampa and Pinellas chapters. It offers continuing education and networking.

Rudd said shops have closed their doors or are being gobbled up.

"A lot of times it's a picture of the economy," Rudd said. "When things are good, people break off and start their own firms. When things get tough, they go back with other people."

A source of stability

Although Florida's engineering community was hard hit, the field of forensic engineering tends to be relatively steady, Rudd said.

"They are not depending on as much the community development or government work," he said. "They are doing court cases which stays steady."

When firms network or get together, it's fairly common for one to bring on another to help out on a large project, Rudd said.

Bracken said the firm relied on its reputation and referrals throughout its lifetime.

The company's current marketing is comprised of a handful of print ads, logos on professional society websites and the occasional sponsorship of an industry function.

Marketing, for Bracken, is interacting with peers and clients. The company stays active in engineering societies and relies on relationships with other companies for referrals.

Bracken encourages engineers on staff to get involved in professional societies.

"Our goal in interacting with our peers is to find out what their strengths are and what our strengths are," he said.

INFO

Business: Bracken Engineering Inc.

Nature of business: Structural engineering and design, forensic investigation, restoration

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