

The surveying profession was one of the hardest hit sectors of the recession. Many firms are still struggling, and it's easy to say that the profession as a whole is in trouble. But look closer and you'll see glimmers of optimism. There are firms that have continued to do well throughout the recession—in fact, some firms are experiencing their best business ever. How are such results possible in this economic climate?

POB sought out some of these firms and interviewed their leaders. What we discovered was that today's most successful surveying and mapping businesses generally follow five basic principles:

- **Diversification.** Focusing on a single market can be a lucrative strategy when that market is booming but can be disastrous in a recession. Firms that serve multiple market sectors are better positioned to experience steady growth over the long term.
- **Education.** Going beyond the requirements of continuing education for licensing is crucial to success in today's



7 Progressive Surveying Firms

And What You Can Learn From Them

● **fast-paced market.** High performers are lifelong learners who value education in all forms, including college degree programs, conference attendance, magazine articles and books, and online research. They study technologies and trends as well as overall business strategies. Firms that value learning and invest in their employees' education are simply smarter.

● **Imagination.** Land surveying is a foundation for many other services, including GIS, building information modeling (BIM), engineering and spatial data management. The ability to view professional expertise from different angles

and recognize opportunities outside of a traditional business model is invaluable.

- **Collaboration.** Successful firms understand their strengths, recognize their limitations, and actively build a network of trusted teaming partners to bridge any gaps. Relationships both with clients and with other professionals are key.
- **Adaptation.** Owning the newest laser scanner or mobile mapping system isn't imperative to being profitable. However, firms that understand the technology trends and adapt to them in a way that makes sense for their firm and their clients will always have a competitive advantage. Having a well-trained,

knowledgeable staff with access to the best tools for the job is a surefire strategy for success.

The seven firms profiled in this issue aren't necessarily the "top seven," and they aren't the only firms with a track record of high performance. But they are worthy of recognition for their approach, perspective and accomplishments. Here are their stories.

Editor's note: View the online version of this article at www.pobonline.com for additional content related to this report.

Company Name: Rice Associates Inc.

Website: www.ricesurveys.com

Headquarters: Manassas, Va.

Year Established: 1986

Number of Employees: 50 personnel, including seven registered land surveyors, two certified photogrammetrists, two Leica factory-trained high-definition LiDAR scanning specialists and a cross-trained support staff of office and field technicians

Primary Services Offered: Control surveys, aerial mapping, photogrammetry, LiDAR scanning, global positioning, utility location, hydrographic studies, location and route surveys, bridge situations, and boundary surveys



Like many other surveying firms, Rice Associates began to see a slowdown in the fall of 2008. A backlog of state and municipal assignments carried the firm through 2009, but as those projects ended, new projects failed to emerge. According to President David "Charlie" F. Rice, III, LS, it was a sign that the firm needed to redouble its efforts. "We competed or re-competed for several state and municipal contracts," he says. "We also continued our aggressive marketing strategy, which involved expanding our client base to maximize our participation in project types least impacted by the recession. We used customized presentations to more effectively share our skills and knowledge with existing and new clients, attended trade shows and conferences, and stayed abreast of upcoming opportunities."

These efforts paid off, and the firm was able to not only maintain its existing base where it was incumbent but was also able to expand the number of its term contracts. As a result, 2011 is on track to be the firm's best year ever in terms of revenues. The company is expanding geographically and is seeking to hire additional personnel at all levels.

Rice Associates wasn't always so aggressive. In its early years, the firm completed the vast majority of surveying assignments by traditional means. But as technology advanced, the firm sought out ways to incorporate new systems and processes. "We have become more innovative and always consider alternative approaches to

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—David "Charlie" F. Rice, III, LS

survey projects for the purpose of enhancing the productivity of our resources," Rice explains. "We employ various methods to produce our deliverables based on specific project requirements including extensive use of GPS, conventional ground survey, aerial mapping/photogrammetry, and LiDAR. Importantly, we strive to combine conventional survey and LiDAR on virtually all of our medium-size and larger regard-

less of project type. When practical in terms of efficiency and cost, we will also incorporate aerial mapping/photogrammetry into the process. Our goal is to be viewed as a client's 'one stop shop' when it comes to procuring survey support services."

Although technology is important, Rice says it's the people that drive the growth of the business. Rice Associates is an employee-owned firm, and each employee has a vested interest in the company's success. The firm invests in its employee-owners by providing cross-training, educational assistance and technical training. "We stress the importance of quality and client satisfaction," Rice says, "and our long-term employees have always sought to instill that commitment to new employees. We structure our approach to providing our

services in a manner that adheres to the parameters established by the client, and we are steadfast in our commitment to get the work done on time, at a high level of quality and at a reasonable price."

According to Rice, becoming valuable project partners is one way to ensure the long-term viability of the surveying profession. "Historically, surveying was viewed by many public sector clients and engineering firms as a necessary evil falling at the bottom of the food chain," he says. "Surveyors were seen as people pounding stakes in the ground, measuring between them, and drawing sketches but not really knowing why. We have worked extremely hard not to be viewed in that way. Through our concerted efforts to satisfy our clients' specific needs and provide a high quality product in a timely and cost effective manner, we feel we have achieved that objective. Our clients understand that our work in large part forms the foundation for their efforts, and we now serve as an active and involved member on owner/client teams."

