

22 Most Influential People in Residential HVAC

by Michael Weil, editorial director

Over the years, the editors of this magazine have traveled the country, visiting many contracting firms, manufacturers, and distributors, as well as the various trade associations. Besides writing stories and attending meetings, we see, firsthand, many people who work tirelessly on behalf of the entire industry.

It was from these interactions that the *Contracting Business.com* Hall of Fame recognition for contractors was born. But we feel there is a need to recognize more than just contractors (though some are certainly included here). So we got together and, with the help of a number of our industry partners, came up with the following list of top “influencers” of this industry. Time or era in which they served was not considered — we looked at what they did and do, how they did and do it, and the impact of those efforts on the industry.

This list wasn’t easy to put together. But it is ours and we’re sticking to it. So here are *Contracting Business.com* magazine’s top 22 most influential people in the residential HVAC industry:

1 THE HOMEOWNER. How can you not recognize the people who buy our products and services and who make demands based on their comfort and their wallets? Without them, there is no HVAC industry. Period.



2 John Gorrie and Willis Carrier. Yes, we have a tie for second place. We feel that both of these gentlemen set the stage for creating the modern HVAC Industry. Gorrie, patented the first mechanical ice-making machine in 1851. Carrier created the psychrometric chart and invented the modern air conditioning system.



3 Edmund Copeland. Copeland was a Michigan inventor who founded his company in 1921 to manufacture compressors for the refrigeration industry. The first successful mechanical refrigeration system developed by Copeland is in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.



4 Thomas R. “Doc” Rusk. Doc was the owner of Rusk Heating and Air Conditioning, Covington, KY. He believed in sharing and teaching. He was one of the first to share his accounting books during seminars to show other con-



tractors the importance of profit and loss, overhead, inventory cycling, and so on. Doc also was an early proponent of selling ancillary products along with heating and cooling equipment, and was one of the better marketers in the industry. He was the first inductee into the *Contracting Business.com* Hall of Fame.

com Hall of Fame.

5 Ron Smith. A contractor whose company, Modern Air Conditioning, Fort Myers, FL, boasted having the very first million dollar salesperson. Ron is a brilliant businessman, entrepreneur, and educator who dedicates his time to helping contractors build wealth in their businesses and their personal income.



In that effort, he became one of the first proponents of selling maintenance agreements. Some dub him the Father of the Service Agreement in the HVAC Industry.

6 Tom Mutz. Founder of Unique Indoor Comfort, a residential HVAC company with branches across the Midwest. Tom was expert in helping other contractors rescue their businesses from bankruptcy. Like Doc Rusk, he gave selflessly of his time to make others, even competitors, successful. He measured his success in terms of how much money his managers made. He also was one of the first inductees into the *Contracting Business.com* Hall of Fame.



7 Tom McCart. From successful salesperson (he was the first \$1 million residential sales person working for Ron Smith) to a tireless sales trainer and consultant, McCart left his mark on an industry that was literally starving for professional salespeople. McCart translated his successes into a curriculum that changed how HVAC salespeople sell in the marketplace and he presented classes, wrote columns for this magazine, and spoke at conferences, meetings, and tradeshow across the U.S. until his death in 2004.



8 David Debien. Some called him a renegade. Others called him a zealot. Either way, David contributed greatly to how this industry views humidity removal from buildings. He championed humidity control using the entire HVAC system instead of just a humidifier/dehumidifier product, and was always looking for better ways to accomplish that.



Jeff Forker. Jeff was the publisher of *Contracting Business.com* magazine. His philosophy was, "If you take care of the contractor first, the entire HVAC industry benefits later." Jeff worked



tirelessly behind the scenes to help contractors, including being instrumental in helping the industry create a national certification program for contractors that lead directly to the birth of the North American Technicians Excellence (NATE) organization.

Larry Taylor. Brilliant businessman. Innovator. Coach. A leader who not only guided his company, AirRite, into becoming one of the best HVAC companies in the country, but he guided the industry as well, as a past chairman of the Air Conditioning Contractors of America (2001), this magazine's



Contractor of the Year (2004), and ACCA's Residential Contractor of the Year (2012). Just this past August, he was inducted into *Contracting Business.com*'s Hall of Fame.

Bud Mingledorff. It takes a lot of effort to grow one's distribution business 648% and still find the time to lead the Heating, Air-conditioning, and Refrigeration Distributors International (HARDI). Bud's influence extended to the contractor community as well, with his strong support of technician certification through North American Technician Excellence (NATE).

Matt Michel. Besides running the industry's largest online association, Matt gives back to the industry through his writing as well as in the classes he teaches for contractors, distributors, and trade associations. He is a former member of the NATE board of directors, one of the longest standing members of this magazine's advisory board, and an outspoken supporter of the mechanical systems contractors.



Harold Goodman. From HVAC contractor to HVAC product manufacturer, Goodman helped create a strong retail marketplace for mechanical equipment by producing quality, low-cost products and delivering them through a strong distribution network. The manufacturing company he started in 1975, now owned by Daikin Industries, is one of the largest in the U.S. today.

Paul Stalknecht. The president and CEO of the Air Conditioning Contractors of America, Paul oversees one of the strongest voices of the HVAC contractor in Washington, D.C. In his 12 years leading ACCA, he has helped the organization nearly double its membership, and oversees the development of programs and standards/certifications to help members run successful and profitable companies.

Ray Isaac. Ray's focus has always been on contractor professionalism. From the company he runs to his industry roles as past chairman of ACCA and past chairman of NATE, Ray preaches, teaches, lives and breathes professionalism to the marketplace.



Dominick Guarino. After editing this magazine, Guarino went on to help found the National Comfort Institute. His mission is to teach the contracting industry the importance



of performance-based contracting. He is a behind-the-scenes worker who was part of the original team that developed NATE and HVAC Comfotech, and he promotes the house-as-a-system contracting approach.

Don Frensburg. Through his leadership at HARDI as the executive vice president, chief operating officer, and chairman, Frensburg helped to set the stage to continue the education and success of member companies, and provided key support during the development of contractor certification. He served as a past chairman of NATE and currently is the chairman of the HARDI Foundation.

Mitch Cropp. From *Contracting Business.com* Contractor of the Year to ACCA Chairman, Mitch set the stage for improving contractors' ability to succeed by setting examples of the possibilities — from service agreement sales, to marketing, to financial management, to creating "raving fans" of customers.



Steve Yurek is CEO and president of the Air-Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Institute (AHRI) — a very strong industry voice in Washington, D.C. He manages the organization that oversees manufactured product certifications, publishes industry standards, and works with government agencies such as EPA and DOE on policies that impact the entire HVAC industry.

Vicki LaPlant. You could say contractor education is in Vicki's blood. From her early days working for Lennox Industries writing and editing technical training courses, to her role as director of dealer development (Lennox), to the founding of her company (VLE Enterprises, Dallas, TX with her husband, John), Vicki has traveled the country teaching and helping contractors in all aspects of running their businesses.



Talbot Gee. Since stepping into his roles as executive vice president and chief operating officer of HARDI, Talbot has been a force to contend with in strengthening the voice of distributors in Washington, D.C. as well as working hard to improve industry channel relations. His mission: to have HARDI become "a 24/7 consulting arm for our members" and helping members deal "with the profit margin crunch."

Jim Abrams and **John Young.** No top influencer list is complete without addressing the impact of franchising on the HVAC industry and Abrams and Young are two of the most influential. From Airtime 500 to Clockwork Home Services and everything in between, these two men brought franchising to this industry with a formula that worked and forever changed the marketplace as a result. 