



# Manufacturers 2013 REP OF THE YEAR Spirit Group



Spirit Group features a strong mix of industry veterans and young executives. Pictured, from left: Benn Freeman, Ian Heacox, Matt Clark, Chase Freeman, Mike Ross, Scott Heacox, Sheree Freeman and Bill Freeman.

## Orlando, Fla.-based agency covers all bases when it comes to superior customer service.

>> By Mike Miazga  
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*Photos by Mike Miazga/Supply House Times*

**S**heree Freeman recalls a conversation she once had with a professional baseball scout during one of her youngest son Mike's baseball games.

"He used an expression that really resonated with me," she says. "He said, 'If you take a man's money, he can go out and make more money. If you take his time, you are taking a piece of his life.'"

Freeman, the controller at Orlando, Fla.-based manufacturers representative Spirit Group, thinks about that expression as it relates to the company's 18 employees.

"Our employees are giving us a piece of their lives," she says. "It's our job to make Spirit Group a valuable piece of their lives."

Freeman and her husband, **Bill**, the founder and CEO of the company, are effusive in the praising of their staff, which they say makes it possible for the company to provide exemplary service to its customers and the manufacturers it represents.

A strong mix of industry veterans and talented newcomers committed to

a team concept, coupled with key technology and training advances position Spirit Group as a market leader in Florida and is the basis for the 20-year-old company being named the 2013 Supply House Times Manufacturers Representative of the Year.

"It sounds cliché, but good people set us apart," Bill Freeman says. "We have people here with like-minded sales philosophies, strong work ethics, conservative personal and business-management principles and a good strategic view of the business."

### Consistent growth

Bill Freeman and partners **David Harris**, **Mike Ross** and **Scott Heacox** hatched Spirit Group in 1994, the product of a previous rep firm's downsizing.

Spirit Group, an AIM/R member, started with eight employees and eight manufacturer lines focusing mainly on residential and commercial products. The company's first office featured a 5,500-sq.-ft. warehouse, of which 800 sq. ft. was office space. Charlotte Pipe





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customers, great  
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# 2013 Rep of the Year



Spirit Group's inside sales team plays a major role in the company's success. Pictured, clockwise from bottom left: Tina Johnson, Debi Calamia, Matt Clark, Chase Freeman, Benn Freeman, Ernie Jones, Patrick Mathews, Sheree Freeman and Patrice Davis.

was the company's first line and provided it with a foundation and momentum in its nascent days.

"Charlotte Pipe was very important for us," says Heacox, Spirit Group's North territory manager. "If we didn't start off with them, I don't know if we could have taken off like we did. Charlotte Pipe gave us instant credibility."

Two decades later, Spirit Group operates out of a 20,000-sq.-ft. warehouse and an additional 2,500-sq.-ft. office just north of downtown Orlando.

The company now represents 18 manufacturers covering the residential, commercial/mechanical, industrial, waterworks and export markets.

"Spirit Group demonstrates the ability to work with us to develop and implement a yearly strategic plan, which enables market-share growth in the markets they serve," Apollo Valves Director of Commercial Sales **Brian Blalock** says. "They support our line throughout the entire organization and present a professional image to our customers."

Spirit Group covers the state of Florida, excluding the Florida Panhandle west of the Apalachicola River. Sales territories are divided into the North, East, West, South and Central regions of the state. **Luis Gomez** and **Randy Johnson** are South territory managers, while Ross and newly hired **Jeff Stanley** handle the West region.

Bill Freeman notes, despite requests, there has never been the temptation to expand to neighboring states or to complete its Florida coverage by going into a Panhandle region typically served by bordering states.

"Our goal is to make things here better instead of bigger," he says. "One of our strengths is the great relationships we currently have."

Spirit Group's employee roster is filled with industry veterans and young executives who have made immediate positive impacts to the company's fiscal health. Heacox is in his 43rd year in the business and has been with Spirit Group since the beginning. West Territory Manager Ross also has a long tenure in the industry. Bill and Sheree Freeman, Heacox and Ross comprise the company's executive committee.

## Congratulations

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The Freeman's two oldest sons play key roles in the company's management structure. **Benn Freeman** is the company president, while **Chase Freeman** is vice president of the industrial and waterworks divisions. Younger brother, **Mike**, is a professional baseball player in the Arizona Diamondbacks chain, and works part-time in inside sales during the offseason.

Both Freeman brothers cut their teeth in the industry outside Spirit Group. Benn Freeman worked in a number of roles for Watts in Atlanta prior to joining the family business, while Chase worked for Ferguson in several Florida locations.

"I learned a lot about the way a manufacturer works and that's helped me in working with all our manufacturers," Benn Freeman says. "It helps with my perception of the customer."

Vice President of Sales and Marketing **Matt Clark** and Heacox's son, **Ian**, further strengthen the company's future. Ian Heacox, vice president of specification sales, also worked on the manufacturer's side of the business for Charlotte Pipe prior to joining Spirit Group. Clark, who grew up across the street from the Freemans, was the first new hire after the original eight employees and is Spirit's technical expert. If there is a technical question on a product Spirit represents, Clark almost surely has the answer.

"It would be hard to find a younger, better-prepared and more talented management team," says Bill Freeman, who lauded the original contributions of Harris, **Ron Collins** and **Donna Degregory** (all now retired from Spirit) in the company's early years.

## All hands on deck

Wholesale distributors continue to be Spirit Group's longest-standing relationships. The company also calls on a wide range of specification and secondary market influences and customers.

"We view wholesale distributors and supply houses as our partners," Bill Freeman says. "We are strongly committed to selling our manufacturers' products only through wholesale distribution. Due to the consolidation of manufacturer lines and consolidation in distribution, we can't always align every brand and product we represent to every distributor we call on. Wherever we are aligned, we are extremely committed to our wholesale partners."

Rheem Water Heating Region Sales Manager **John Andrews** has worked with Spirit Group

since 2007 and is impressed with the company's "high level of commitment and customer focus through all levels of the supply chain."

"They are a well-balanced rep agency," Andrews adds. "They understand the importance of relationships in our business and work on developing, strengthening and maintaining those relationships with a high level of integrity."

A team-first philosophy permeates throughout Spirit Group's inside and outside sales forces where collaboration on jobs is commonplace. As Ian Heacox notes, "All egos are checked at the door."

"No two salesmen are pitted against each other on a job," Chase Freeman says. "Everybody talks to each other here. If someone has a problem or a

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## ON BEING NAMED 2013 SUPPLY HOUSE TIMES REP OF THE YEAR

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# 2013 Rep of the Year



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question, others will have the ammunition ready to solve the problem.”

Benn Freeman adds: “We’re not all competing over one order. We put our heads together to find the best approach so the manufacturer gets the order.”

The firm’s unsung heroes are its inside sales staff, which features **Patrick Mathews** (quotations manager), **Patrice Davis**, **Debi Calamia**, **Tina Johnson** (doubles as IT manager), **Ernie Jones** (who also does outside sales for the East territory) and **Barry Ayres** (who doubles as the warehouse manager). The close-knit group provides a major knowledge resource for the company’s lines, customers and its outside sales staff.

“The relationship our inside sales staff has with our customers and manufacturers makes the biggest difference,” Chase Freeman says. “Our inside salespeople may as well wear nametags of the manufacturers we represent. They are that knowledgeable about our manufacturers.”

Mathews, who once worked as a Major League Baseball clubhouse attendant for several teams, says the inside group is driven to providing the highest level of service possible. “We all have the passion. We have a strong loyalty to our customers,” he says. “We will work together to find the answer.”

Spirit’s inside sales staff also has a good balance of veterans and newcomers. Davis came from the hospitality industry in her native Jamaica and Johnson also is a recent hire from outside the markets.

“It’s a credit to some of our longtime employees who have mentored our younger inside staff,” Bill Freeman says. “Inside sales sometimes doesn’t get the recognition it deserves. In football the quarterbacks and running backs get all the recognition and the guys up on the line blocking can get forgotten. Our inside sales people generate sales and strengthen our relationships just like our outside salespeople do. They are extremely important to this company and its success.”

### Strategic tools

Training is a major point of emphasis at Spirit Group. Lunch and learns are held for wholesalers, contractors and engineers, while constant product training is conducted internally and externally for company staff. Trips to visit manufacturers’ facilities are a frequent occurrence.

“I learn a lot going out on sales calls with manufacturers,” Chase Freeman says. “Every time, I pick up something new.”

While Spirit Group outfits its salespeople with the latest technology, a

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customized intranet system originally developed by Degregory has spawned untold new efficiencies through a comprehensive central gathering of data ranging from manufacturer product information to notes on the company's ongoing jobs. Sheree Freeman says the system allowed the company to remove eight file cabinets of printed materials in the last three years.

"Having our intranet system turns a five-minute phone call into a one-and-a-half-minute phone call," Jones says.

Beyond technology advancements, Spirit Group benefits from the strategic approach it takes in selling the lines it represents.

"In the old days, you went out and chased every order," Ross says. "When Spirit Group started in 1994, one of the foundations was finding select distributors you could line up with and try to drive business through. In doing that, you're giving the brand more value to the distributor and to our agency."

The power of the brand, Ross adds, is the name of the game at Spirit Group. "It always comes back to driving the brand and creating brand demand," he says. "We don't have the cheapest prices, but we do have great brand value in the manufacturers we represent."

Ian Heacox notes the company leaves no stone unturned when it comes to getting the lines its represents in front of customers.

"You can't get credibility without digging deeper," he says. "We'll go three or four levels below and work with facility maintenance people and hospitals and municipality waterworks."

Clark adds: "The manufacturer has to react quicker than ever to consumer

demand and wholesalers are managing inventories smarter than ever. That puts the responsibility more than ever back onto the manufacturers rep. You have to go into those secondary influences and dig deeper. The ones who don't make those calls won't make it in today's environment."

Ross stresses Spirit Group's work is far from done once an order is completed. "We're accountable to our distributors after the sale," he says. "For example, Matt Clark will go out onsite and help troubleshoot a product. We're here to help and provide that backup support to our customers."

## Changing times

Bill Freeman says the company navigated the rough economic waters of the latter part of the previous decade by working harder and diversifying its business. He notes sales started to slip in 2007 and the company withstood a rough 2009.

"The residential downturn hit Florida hard and early, so we focused more on commercial markets and products," he says. "When commercial softened, we devoted more attention to our industrial and waterworks segments. As a rep you never have complete control, but we try to be strategic in managing our product offering, the number of lines represented and market segment diversity."

Business has picked up for the firm over the last four years. "We're headed in the right direction," Bill Freeman says. "It's just a shallower climb out of the hole than the slide into it. We've learned that efficiency is one of the key differentiators in a rep agency's success."

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## Congratulations to Spirit Group, Inc.

Winner of Supply House Times' 2013 Manufacturers Rep of the Year and McGuire's latest Rep of the Year award!

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## 2013 Rep of the Year

In recent times, Spirit Group has been involved with a number of high-profile projects, including separate massive children's and veteran's hospitals out by Orlando International Airport, as well as the new Amway Center arena (home of the NBA's Orlando Magic) and the city's new performing arts center currently under construction in downtown Orlando. Bill Freeman reports business in the first part of 2013 has been strong, particularly in South Florida.

"We've had a fast start in Florida since the beginning of 2013 – faster than expected after the election," he says. "New construction housing is improving and there is optimism. The Florida market is still a bit fragile, so we'll see how the rest of the year plays out. There still is a lot of concern about unemployment, health-care costs and foreclosures. Next year and the couple years after are a concern and we're beginning to prepare for more challenges in case they occur. We're positioned well in diversified segments and with our manufacturer product offerings."

Bill Freeman says Spirit Group's young leadership group puts it on rock-solid ground for years to come. "Our veterans have brought them along the right way," he says. "These guys are so much farther along with their knowledge of the industry, the markets and the products we represent than I was at a similar age. We have a very prepared young management group that is quickly assuming control of our agency's future. We're in a great position." ☞



# Vortens™

It is with great pleasure that Vortens congratulates Spirit Group Inc. on winning the 2013 Rep. of the Year Award.

We cannot think of a more worthy recipient for this prestigious award, and want to state how proud and honored we are of working with such a fine company.

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