

Transcript

Krystal Hobbs 0:04

Welcome to Beyond the Tools, the podcast that helps contractors attract more leads, grow their business, and finally get off the tools. In each episode, you'll discover marketing tactics that work. You'll get actionable insights from other successful contractors, and connect with experts to help you grow. I'm your host, Krystal Hobbs, owner of a social media agency that helps contractors attract and convert more leads. Get ready to take your business to the next level so you can finally enjoy the fruits of your hard labor. Ready, let's go!

Krystal Hobbs 0:46

Hey, contractors, welcome back to Beyond the Tools. Today I have a delightful chat with Nathalie Brooks, who is the owner of Brookes Heating & Air in Ontario, and the co-founder of Women in HVACR Canada. Now my agency, Reflective Marketing, recently became a member of Women in HVACR Canada, very excited to support this organization. And Nathalie has so much value to share with the industry. And especially for those of you that are Canadians, for sure. So Nathalie is truly a serial entrepreneur. She started by running a clothing store before she and her husband started Brooks Heating and Air. And like many people in the trades, Nathalie had family in the business. Her grandfather was in the heating business, installing and servicing boilers in the Netherlands and Indonesia. Her father was a gas fitter and then her father actually helped Chris, her husband, learn the trade. And now today, Brooks Heating & Air has two sons, Lucas and Tucker who are also involved in the business. And they grew from one crew 10 years ago to seven trucks on the road today. So in today's interview, we talk about their growth journey at Brooks Heating & Air. And we also talk about how Nathalie started Women in HVACR Canada, which is such an important organization. So if you have any interest in getting more women involved in the trades or hiring women, this is a great interview to listen to for that. But also to see how Nathalie and her husband were able to grow this family business and some of the lessons that they learned from growing too fast. Let's head on over and chat with Nathalie.

Krystal Hobbs 2:48

Nathalie, welcome to the show. I'm so excited to have you here.

Nathalie Brooks 2:52

Thank you very much. Nice to be here.

Krystal Hobbs 2:55

It's always great talking with a fellow Canadian.

Nathalie Brooks 2:58

That's right. That's right.

Krystal Hobbs 3:01

Awesome. So, Nathalie, I love your story. And I think it's really helpful for people to know how you got into all of this. So tell us a little bit of the Coles Notes version of how you got started in the trades.

Nathalie Brooks 3:19

Okay, so I actually got started in a trade. My father was in the trades for a long time, my grandfather was too. And then when I met my husband, my husband started into trades with my dad. And then my husband worked for several different companies. Working with my dad was a little bit of a challenge when it's family. So he came home one day, and he was like, "Let's start our own business." And I said, "Okay." I used to own a clothing store so I've run a business before. I've run a few different little businesses before and I thought we could do this. We have two sons so I thought this might be a great way to lead them into the trades as well. 13 years ago, we started Brooks Heating and Air and it was just one truck and I answered the phones and he went on jobs. And so it built from there.

Krystal Hobbs 4:10

I love that. And it's great that it's a family business. I know a lot of our listeners fall into that category as well. And now you're at a point, do you guys have 12 staff? Is that where you're in?

Nathalie Brooks 4:23

We're actually up to 14 now. We just hired two more. We're pretty excited. We hired two more, sort of at the apprenticeship level like they're coming right out of trade school. We kind of have found that we prefer to do that. We're training them the way we want them to work rather than having bad habits that they get elsewhere. So we can train them from the ground up. So, we've got two new guys starting this week. And then we also just hired a new home comfort advisor. So that'll give Chris a little bit of a break from having to do all the sales as well.

Krystal Hobbs 4:57

Fantastic. And I would love to dig into the apprentice side of things more. So we will definitely get there. But I guess tell me, what was the journey going from just two of you, one truck, to now being at a point where you guys have 14 staff? How did that growth happen?

Nathalie Brooks 5:19

Right. Well, we were lucky because we're in our small hometown. So right away, I put Chris's picture on all of our advertisements, and a lot of people recognized him as a local guy. So we were pretty successful right from the start. We made a good little living off it, and we hired staff pretty quickly. We hired a helper and we hired some more technicians. And then we ended up moving into a commercial location because we couldn't run the company from home anymore. We just had too many trucks and the neighbors were complaining. So we ended up moving into a commercial property. And we grew. Actually, it was 2014 and we grew too fast. We were mentioning this before, we doubled our in size, and it was just too much like it was, it was kind of crazy. So we decided to kind of scale back a little bit. And then we just grew organically after that. So we do have an office manager now and a part-timer in the office, and then myself, and then Chris has sales, which he now won't be. He'll be managing the whole company which is what owners should be doing. And then we have the rest of our crew, our install and service crew.

Krystal Hobbs 6:33

Let's dig into that a little bit more because I think that's interesting and obviously, so many of us can learn from the mistakes or challenges of others. I think that's so important. So you guys are essentially at a point where you doubled in size in just a year. Tell me what happened there. So like, was it just that you got all this demand and you're like, "Okay, we need to hire"?

Nathalie Brooks 7:04

Well, I think part of it going into a commercial building, we had more trucks that we had on the road. So those are big billboards, driving advertisements, really. So we needed to hire. We got a lot more business. We needed to hire people. And we just hired too fast. It got busy. We all make this mistake. You end up hiring this, "Oh, you have a gas license, great come work for me." And the quality control was just not there. We weren't checking on their jobs. And so it kind of hurt us in the long run because the customers weren't getting what the quality of service that they were used to getting from us. So we decided to scale back a little bit and then we built our team. We had a really good team.

But in our industry, it's sort of a revolving door. So we've been lucky in the last five years, we've had the same crew for quite a while. We have quite a few guys that have been with us for a long time which is rare in our industry. Usually, a lot of companies have like two to three years that they can hold on to and then they move on to greener pastures.

Krystal Hobbs 8:08

That's amazing. And I know that it is a big challenge in the industry, not only attracting the right people but keeping them. What are some of the things that you guys do to make sure that your techs stick around?

Nathalie Brooks 8:25

Well, we pay really well. I think we pay really well. Obviously, we are sometimes competing with Union shops which do pay a lot more, but then they have to pay union dues. So as a private company, we paid quite well on the spectrum compared to other companies like ours. We give benefits and then we try and have fun. We try and do fun stuff with the guys. A lot of it was pre-COVID and we haven't done that much since COVID. We just took everyone to Dave and Buster's for the night and that was really fun. We've taken them on fishing trips where we rent to chartered a boat on Lake Ontario and fished, that kind of thing. We've always kind of tried to do really fun stuff. We have a Christmas party every year and so just to try and keep them as a team and we're just like a big family.

Krystal Hobbs 9:13

I love that. And really infusing your family-run business. So infusing that culture of the fam.

Nathalie Brooks 9:22

Exactly.

Krystal Hobbs 9:23

So Nathalie, when you were saying that at the time you guys really exploded and you were just hiring everyone if they had a gas license or whatever, what did that teach you about attracting and hiring the right people?

Nathalie Brooks 9:42

Well, it taught us to really take those 90 probationary days seriously. Sometimes you end up just giving people a chance, another chance, and then the next thing, you have to let them go, and then you're looking at paying severance and things like that. So we've kind of figured out that within a few weeks, we can see if we can suss people out

and see if they're a good fit for our company. I don't mean to sound like a mean boss but there are definitely things we look for. We're looking for people who have a bit of a hustle that wants to work hard, There tend to be sometimes people that just like to stand around and they're waiting for someone to constantly say what to do. And we kind of want someone that's going to take some initiative. Go pick up the tools, grab a broom, and sweep if you have to, right? So that's something that we've kind of learned to suss them out for that. And it's really hard to get that in the interview stage because everyone always puts their best foot forward. So what I have learned is the guys (well, I say guys because I haven't had a lot of women work for me, unfortunately, on the tools) that come in an interview that says, "Well, I have a lot to learn, I don't know everything, I am good at my job but there are always things I can improve on." - they tend to be the ones that are really great technicians. The ones that come and tell me, "Oh, I know how to do that. I know how to do this. I know how to do that." And then it turns out, they don't. So I find the ones that are a little bit more modest about their talents and their qualifications tend to be a better fit.

Krystal Hobbs 11:27

That makes sense. So you look for that humility.

Nathalie Brooks 11:31

A little bit of humility, for sure.

Krystal Hobbs 11:34

And I know that training has been a really important piece. And you mentioned having just hired a couple of people straight out of school. So what does that look like? How do you find those people and how do you go about training them?

Nathalie Brooks 11:52

So we have a good relationship with a couple of different trade schools. So we either hire them as co-op students or take them on as co-op students and then sort of see how things go. And then we end up hiring them full-time. We do in-house training as well. But as far as the schooling, we try and support them by not throwing them right to the rules right away. A lot of people come out of school and they go, "I have a gas license." In Ontario, it's the G2 license that we're looking for. And we actually just hired a guy and he was like, "I think I'm confident in what I do." And then today was day two, and he was like, "I realized, I know nothing." So we try to keep them for a full heating season and air conditioning season before we let them do anything on their own. There's a lot of companies that will hire and they'll go, here's the truck, here's the keys, here's the

address, you're going to go figure it out. That's one of the things we've learned the hard way. It doesn't work. We need to give them at least one full heating season, and one full air conditioning season before they're comfortable. I mean, they might feel comfortable doing it, but before they have the qualifications to actually get out there and do a good job at the quality of level that we are expecting. So that's something. I mean, that's a long time. A year is a long time to train someone but in the end, it works out in our favor. We prefer to do it that way.

Krystal Hobbs 13:23

Financially, what does that look like? I guess because I do hear sometimes a lot of fear in hiring an apprentice and investing all that time and effort and energy into them. So how did you guys do that the first time? And how do you make sure that you're able to continue to have those newer employees?

Nathalie Brooks 13:49

We've just set up sort of a structure where there are different levels of pay. And they'll see that. We're open and honest about what everyone is making. So you have a journeyman, they make 100% of the wages. Then there's a lead tech, they make 75% of the wages, they're probably gas licensed, but they're still in the apprentice for air conditioning. And then we have technicians who just come out of school, they're licensed, but they're learning. And then we also have helpers. So the helpers are the ones that sort of come out of high school as co-op students maybe. And so they're making minimum wage, but we're just getting them on the tools. Do you like this job? Is this something you want to pursue and go further with? And then we kind of guide them towards which schooling is best for them. And when they come back to school, then we move them up to the next level. So we were pretty honest about it because we found that you kind of need a goal to work towards, right? If you hire someone, and that's one of the complaints that we hear from guys that we're interviewing, they say, "Well, I worked for this company for five years and they kept saying they're gonna let me do the apprenticeship and then they never do." Or, "they're gonna give me a raise and they never do." So we've decided we're going to be open and honest. And, obviously, it's part of moving up in the world. Your attitude, your drive, and your hustle but then also the qualifications you have. So there's merit to your work towards your next level kind of thing.

Krystal Hobbs 15:34

That's super smart that you give them like, "Here's the roadmap to what it looks like to

work with us.” So when you look back on that time of growing too fast, what were some of the other lessons that you guys learned along the way?

Nathalie Brooks 15:56

What we learned was that we really want to be here for the long run. It's a family business. Our sons were just young at the time. Our oldest son worked full-time for us now but he was 13 when he started. One of our helpers was sick. And we kind of said to him, “Hey, guess what? You're putting in a water heater today with your dad.” So you're going to be that helper and really get them on to tools and stuff. What we realized is that if we don't give the best quality service and customer service, those customers are not going to call us back. And then 10 years down the road, now our son is 23, those customers are calling us back because we have been giving that quality of service. If we had kept on that same trajectory, we would not have been in business anymore. I don't think because people just wouldn't have called us back.

Krystal Hobbs 16:54

Absolutely. And how about in terms of your service area? Has that changed since you guys started your business? Have you found that you've had to adjust what that looks like?

Nathalie Brooks 17:10

Do you mean, like, geographical just service area? So, we actually used to go everywhere, right? Like, you're starting out, and someone in Toronto calls like, “we'll come out, do your service.” And now we realize, “Okay, it could be 45 minutes in traffic to get to Toronto or an hour and a half.” Is it worth my guy going to do that when he could be doing two calls here in Georgetown? So we've decided to narrow our service area to more local and give better quality service. We do 24-hour service. It's very hard to do when you're driving 45 minutes to an hour to a call and then trying to give someone else service. Within that same time, we've lost a little bit of business. We've had to say no to customers. We still have a couple of people that are loyal customers since the beginning that we have kept on that we will still service. But we pretty much have narrowed our service area to a much smaller area. And we're still busy, and we're still successful. So it hasn't really changed.

Krystal Hobbs 18:20

It's more about, I guess, being a lot more efficient with the time that you have and the customers that you choose to serve.

Nathalie Brooks 18:27

Especially with fuel being the cost that it is, right? There's one area where we have to take the toll roads to get there and the tolls are expensive. So if you add that all in, it's not worth traveling to farther distances. We've actually gotten a nice network of other companies that we've gotten to know and we recommend fellow companies all the time in those areas so we can help the customer out by doing that.

Krystal Hobbs 18:56

Fantastic. I mean, it's pretty clear that you guys have done amazing in terms of your growth, and you've learned so much. And now you're in a position where you can also help others to learn whether that's your apprentices or some of the women in the trades that you work with. So I'd love to hear a little bit more about women in HVACR Canada. How did all this come about?

Nathalie Brooks 19:29

So there were a few of us, namely, Shelly, from VISTA credit. We would meet all the time and she would tell me all these other companies that she sees are all struggling to get staff, right? Everyone. I was always asking her, "Hey, do you know anyone looking to jump ship or looking to move to another company?" And she said, "Everybody's in the same boat. Everyone's always looking." So we started to talk about how there's just 50% of the population is not in the industry. We could definitely increase the industry and the number of people on the tools if we included women, but how do we get women on the tools interested in our trades? So back and forth, lots of talking, and we decided to have an initial meeting. It was before COVID. We basically contacted every woman we all knew and we met at the HRAI which is the Heating, Refrigeration, and Air Conditioning Institute. They gave us a room to meet in and we just wanted to see if our women were interested in getting involved in something like this.

So there was lots of interest. We had about I think 20 people that showed up at that meeting in person. And then COVID hits. It all kind of fell apart. We dropped the ball a little bit but then I was invited to speak at ORAC which is a union organization and they kind of left the topic up to me to discuss. They said we can talk about anything you want. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to introduce women in HVAC." So I kind of did a call to action. I said, "Hey, this is what we want to do. Contact me if you're interested." And out of that group, a national group, like, we have people in British Columbia, we've got a member in Newfoundland, and everywhere in between, which is fantastic. So we've gotten lots of sponsors, industry sponsors, we've got, I think, about 75 members now. And that's growing all the time. So we're pretty excited. So now, because it was

during COVID, we could do zoom. So now we're meeting with people from all across Canada which is fantastic, right? Otherwise, it would have been more of a local Ontario, probably GTA group, whereas now we're right across Canada.

Krystal Hobbs 22:01

So it's a blessing in disguise in some way.

Nathalie Brooks 22:04

For sure. And we've gotten so much great support. It's been fantastic.

Krystal Hobbs 22:10

That's awesome. So what are some of the ways that Women in HVACR Canada support women in the trades?

Nathalie Brooks 22:19

The way we try and support women in trades is kind of three different ways. We do education so we're trying to get young women into a guiding help to where they can go to get their education, where they can go get their licenses, their skills, and things like that. We want to do support as far as mentorship. So once you're in the trade, you can come to us if you're having a problem with someone you work with, how do I deal with this or that situation, and it's just a fellow woman to be able to speak to. And then the third part of it is just getting the word out there. So we want to try and speak to younger women, speak with high schools, people that are deciding what career to get into or even like the YMCA, things like that, where people are looking into second careers. And there were a lot of women after the pandemic that was looking at a different career or changing career. Something that's a little bit more COVID-proof, right? I mean, we were an essential business. So it gives you a bit of job protection that way. So those are sort of the three things that we focus on. And we've gotten fantastic sponsorships.

Milwaukee, for example, gave us toolkits to give to the young ladies that are coming out of school so that they have some tools to start with. Because that's one of the barriers to entry when you're looking at the number of tools that you need, they are sponsoring us with that. We've got other tool companies that are sponsoring us. Once we started, we opened the doors, there was like a floodgate of different interests and other groups that we've gotten in touch with. People that do apprenticeships, like supporting Ontario youth, help companies with apprenticeships. So we're able to partner with them. And we can tell companies about them, they come and send people to our website to see what we have to offer. There's a lot of cross-support, I guess, right? So, it's been great for that.

Krystal Hobbs 24:22

That's amazing. And I'm sure that a lot of our listeners are in a similar situation when it comes to the labor shortage and not being able to find workers. So what would you say to an HVAC business owner who doesn't have any women in their team on the tools right now?

Nathalie Brooks 24:44

Well, there are many of us that don't have any women on the tools. And I think we're all looking to have more people on the tools, period, not just women. We're not an organization that's just pro-women. We all need people on the tools. We're just trying to encourage the part of the population that's kind of being overlooked. As far as hiring women, when we had a booth at the CNP Expo this year in Toronto, we were so pleasantly surprised with the support that we were getting. Most of the time, those shows are just men, right? It's a ton of men. And so the women were coming over going, "Yay! Women. There are women here." Right? But then the men that came in meeting with us, we were handing out pink bracelets, as solidarity for getting women in the trades, and young and old, everyone was so excited about what we were doing. There are a lot of young men that are like, "I don't want to work with just guys. I want to work with women." Right? "I want a bit of a mix." There were employers that were saying, "Women tend to be a little more analytical, so they can be more of troubleshooting. And then the men, if they're more physical, doing the physical part of the job, you've got a dream team of employees, right? You've got two sides of the spectrum." I mean, there are a lot of women that are strong and that are able to do the physical part of the job as well. But I do think it's a potential to have a really good mix.

Krystal Hobbs 26:11

Absolutely. And I am curious, I guess, from your members who are currently working in companies, what are some of the barriers or challenges that they face with their current employers? And I asked this through the lens of like, what can we learn about creating a more female-friendly workplace.

Nathalie Brooks 26:36

So one of the things that we want to do with the women in HVAC is to train the trainer. So we want to have either like a guidebook or a training session where we can take, especially sort of the older generation, that's not used to having women on the tools. And maybe just explaining how women think differently, how we speak differently, how we feel things are. We're not saying men and women are not the same, this whole equality thing. If we're not equal, we shouldn't. We don't want to be equal. We just want

the same opportunities, right? So I think people need to understand that they don't have to be scared to have a girl on the tools. So we want to be able to give them the opportunity to come and speak to us as well about how to deal with certain issues that you might not have with an all-male staff. So that's something we're working towards as well.

Krystal Hobbs 27:31

So Nathalie, for any of our listeners who are interested in supporting Women in HVACR Canada, or who want to get involved somehow, how can they learn more?

Nathalie Brooks 27:46

So we have our website, we also have our Facebook group and our Instagram group. So those are two places that you can go visit. We have some very inspiring women that are on the tools, and they're almost like influencers now. It's fantastic, too, so take a look at our site, but also kind of connect to some of the other women that are doing some really fun videos and things like that. It's fantastic to see. We have partnered with our sister group in the United States, which is womeninhvac.com. It's a very similar group, they are an inspiration to us. They are massive, they have tons of members, and they started way before us. So we bow to them and we learn from them and they've shared a ton of resources and things for us to get started. So obviously, if you're in the United States, we would recommend going to that. But anyone in Canada, come and meet out, see the different bios, and then if you're interested in being a member, join us as a member. And we're always looking for help so we have some committees, we have a board of directors so there's lots of work to be done so we're always looking for people that are real go-getters that want to help because there's a ton of work to do. And we're all volunteers right now. We just do it on our own time. If there are companies that want to sponsor us, we are looking for sponsorship. So we've got some fantastic sponsors. Napoleon sponsored us, Carrier, Goodman, I mean, I'm just mentioning a few. Milwaukee I had mentioned. There's Vista credit, one of our diamond sponsors. TRI-AIR is a contracting company, so they're at like a contracting level. So we're looking for anyone to sponsor us. We also partner with other organizations so if someone's interested in partnership with us, we can put your information on our website and they can share their information, and our information on their website, and then we also partner with schools. So any kind of organization and any kind of school that offers HVAC, we want to be able to provide all that information to our students. So those are different ways that you can get involved.

Krystal Hobbs 30:04

Amazing. And Nathalie we'll go ahead and put all of those links in our show notes. So if you're listening and you want to connect with Nathalie or learn more about Women in HVACR Canada, you can go to womeninhvac.ca. And we'll make sure that the links are there. So this has been awesome, Nathalie. I really appreciate you sharing so much on the show. And thanks again.

Nathalie Brooks 30:30

Thank you very much for having me. I appreciate it.

Krystal Hobbs 30:35

Hey, guys, just wanted to say thank you again for listening to Beyond the Tools. I love hearing from our listeners and knowing what topics, what guests, and what's resonating with you from these episodes. So if you want to share your feedback, please do so. You can DM me @reflectivemarketing on Instagram, and Facebook. We're also on Twitter, LinkedIn, Tiktok, wherever you want to. So @reflectivemarketing, and if you are enjoying the show, please go ahead and leave us a review. It really helps us to spread the word to other contractors about our podcast. So thank you so much again.