

Ross consulting business Energy Savers Inc. a family tradition



Siblings Michael Behr and Natalie Abel run their family business, Energy Savers Inc., in Ross Township. The consulting firm, which was founded by their father, helps companies save money on their natural gas and electricity bills.

Natalie Abel and Michael Behr never expected to be running Energy Savers Inc., a consulting business founded by their father more than 30 years ago.

The siblings had careers of their own — Abel as a project manager in several industries and Behr as an information technology manager. But corporate downsizing in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, combined with their father's growing interest in stepping back from day-to-day management of the Ross-based company, led Abel and Behr back to the family business around late 2009.

“We grew up with this company,” Abel said of the firm that helps businesses find the best rates for natural gas and electricity.

Abel, 44, who was named president of the firm this year, and Behr, 48, executive vice president, worked with their father when they were in high school and during summer breaks. But after college, each started their own career.

“Mike and I going out on our own and having our own careers allowed us to bring our own perspectives and experience” to running the firm, Abel said.

“The timing was right” to come back, Behr said.

Over the past six years the siblings increasingly have taken on more responsibility and launched initiatives to grow the firm. They doubled revenue between 2010 and 2013 by branching out into consulting on electricity rates in addition to natural gas. They started working with municipalities and residential customers.

At the beginning of this year, their father, James Behr, handed over the reins.

When Behr founded Energy Savers in 1982, the company installed controls for heating and cooling at businesses. It transitioned into making bulk natural gas purchases for groups of businesses as a way to save them money. When the state deregulated the energy market in the late 1990s, Energy Savers evolved again into a consulting firm that helps clients find the best deals on energy from the many retailers that were springing up.

“We've been able to save significant amounts on our utilities,” said Reid Howe, vice president of Crossgates Management Inc.

The McMurray-based firm with residential and commercial properties throughout Western and Central Pennsylvania has worked with Energy Savers for more than 15 years to find the best energy rates.

With a host of suppliers trying to persuade customers to switch, it is difficult to wade through the offers and land the best deal, Howe said.

“We've got 29 multi-family properties and 5.5 million square feet of commercial space,” Howe said. “With all those properties and all those locations, I'd need a full-time staff person to handle all of that. (Energy Savers) really saves me a ton of time.”

Abel said comparing prices from electricity and natural gas suppliers is not always a straightforward process because there are different fees and delivery charges that can be billed in addition to the price for the energy.

“It can be a very tedious process for them to do this on their own,” she said.

Energy Savers has about 200 core customers, mostly property management firms and small businesses. The company also has been expanding its work with municipalities and works with 30 local governments in the region.

The company is trying to grow its work helping customers take advantage of an incentive program that pays them to reduce their electricity usage during times of high demand, Michael Behr said.

Montgomery County-based PJM Interconnection, the nation's largest regional grid operator, will provide rebates to large electricity users if they cut back use during peak demand, such as very hot days in the summer.

Howe said Crossgates has participated in the program with a 165-unit residential tower in Johnstown. On really hot days, the company can shut down one of its two elevators for several hours and turn off some of its air-handling equipment. Those small, short-term changes can lead to thousands of dollars in savings, he said.

“(Energy Savers) is not just placing gas and electric supply contracts,” he said. “They also come up with some good ideas like that.”

Energy Savers Inc.

What: A family-owned consulting and energy marketing firm that helps companies find the best electric and natural gas rates

Where: Ross

Founded: 1982, by James Behr

Website: www.energysaversinc.com

Executives: Natalie Abel, president; Michael Behr, executive vice president

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