



## Truss Engineering Corp.

# Springfield Company Has A Framework for Growth

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

Joe Henley's desk and office speak to his passion for the game of golf.

The former is littered with golf-themed items such as paper weights and a business card holder. His office walls, meanwhile, are adorned with framed photographs and watercolors of Augusta National and other famed courses.

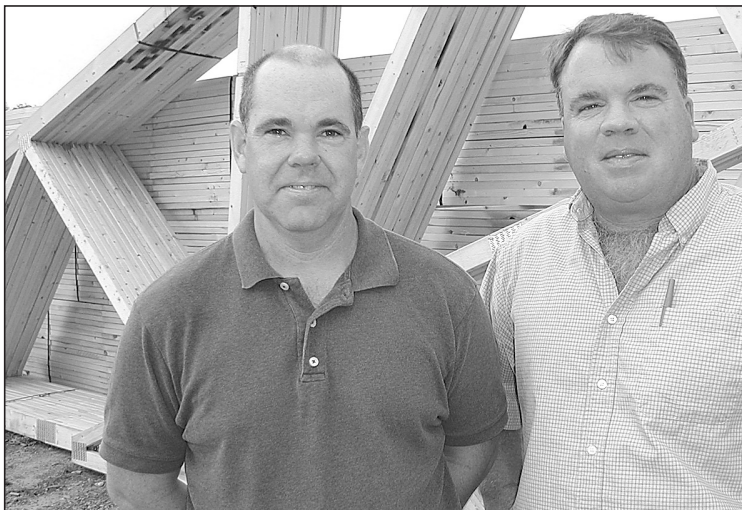
Henley is an avid player, and, for most of his professional life, golf has been his career as well; he spent years in sales and marketing for Titleist and, later, Spalding (now Top-Flite). And when he left the Chicopee-based company in search of entrepreneurial ventures, he came close to buying a golf course.

He thought better of that deal, however, and later took a decidedly different turn — becoming a partner in a venture that manufactures floor and roof trusses for residential and commercial building.

And while that field is worlds apart from sales of clubs, balls, and bags, Henley sees some basic, but important, similarities.

"It still comes down to customer service," he told *BusinessWest*. "You have to make a product that performs and does the job it's designed to do, and back it up with service; you have to keep performing for your customers."

Henley shares this broad assignment with Truss Engineering Corp.'s (TEC's) 80 or so employees (the number fluctuates with the season), and especially with its president, Paul Griswold. A long-time veteran of the company who worked his way through the ranks, Griswold repeatedly tried to buy Truss Engineering with his father, one of the venture's original employees. When those efforts failed,



### Fast Facts:

**Company:** Truss Engineering Corporation

**Address:** 181 Goodwin St.,  
Indian Orchard, Mass. 01151

**Phone:** (413) 543-1298; Fax:  
(413) 543-1847

**Web Site:** [www.trussec.com](http://www.trussec.com)

**Chief Executives:** Paul Griswold  
and Joseph Henley

**Products/Services:** Roof and  
floor trusses

Griswold sought out a new partner, and found one in Henley, who, while mulling purchase of a course, also looked at a golf cart distribution company before finding Truss Engineering.

Henley and Griswold got the deal done two years ago. Since then, they've made a number of changes and investments designed to make the company a larger, more successful player in the highly competitive field of truss-making. They have been helped in their efforts by a residential building boom and growth of sectors like elderly housing and assisted living. But mostly, growth — in numbers good enough to make the Super 60's Revenue Growth list for 2005 — has come through efforts to make the company more efficient and responsive to the customer.

*BusinessWest* looks at how the

Indian Orchard-based company is building on that framework.

### Board Meeting

The vast storage area at Truss Engineering is crowded with lumber, mostly Canadian Spruce, and a variety of finished products — trusses in wide array of shapes and sizes.

The quantity and variety of products has grown steadily since the company was created by four partners in 1961. Back then, trusses were a relatively new product, said Griswold, adding that that they quickly gained acceptance, even in traditional New England, as a way to build more quickly, without sacrificing quality.

Truss Engineering has witnessed several economic expansions and parallel building booms in its lifetime, he said, noting that

the mid-to late '80s was probably the high-water mark. Conversely, it has also survived several downturns, most notably the prolonged recession of the early '90s, when most building came to a virtual standstill and many construction-related businesses succumbed to the economic elements.

TEC has managed to stay in business, said Griswold, because of its hard-earned reputation for quality and, equally important, dependability, and also the forging of effective partnerships with many of the area's lumber yards, which do much of the actual bidding on truss projects.

The company has enjoyed steady growth over the years, said Griswold, noting that his father, who eventually attained the title of general manager, saw a strong future for TEC and the two made repeated attempts to buy it.

"We made several different offers," said Griswold, who became general manager himself in the late '90s, "but just couldn't get it done."

Since successfully crafting a deal to purchase the company from one of its original founders, Stuart Young, in October, 2003, Griswold and Henley have put together a business plan that treats TEC as if it was a new venture, not a 44-year-old company.

"In many ways, we are new company even though we've been around a long time," said Griswold, noting that as partners, he and Henley are utilizing their specific strengths and talents to take TEC to a higher level.

For Griswold, that strength is knowledge of the business, which has grown and become increasingly competitive over the years. Henley, meanwhile, brings his background in sales and marketing to the assignment.

"I had to essentially learn the

business,” Henley told *BusinessWest*, “and there was a lot to learn.”

Specifically, he’s learned that this is, in many ways, a word-of-mouth business, and that the company’s best selling tool is its last job.

“The work is getting increasingly complicated,” said Griswold, citing, as one example, an assisted living community in Simsbury, Conn. that featured a roof with several different shapes and thus required unique, custom-built trusses. “But that tests your ability and lets you show people what you can do; if you can take a job that’s really complicated and that someone else can’t do, that puts you in the driver’s seat.”

TEC strives to do more driving in an operating area that forms roughly a 120-mile circle

around Springfield. TEC makes trusses ranging from four feet across to nearly 80 feet, for projects ranging from backyard sheds to car washes; homes to senior housing complexes. There are some standard models, but most of what goes out the door is custom-made.

When asked how the company works to stand out in a field of about a dozen other truss manufacturers in the Northeast, Griswold said simply, “doing the job correctly, with no mistakes.”

By this, he meant manufacturing a piece to often-demanding specifications, and delivering it *when* the customer needs it.

“Without trusses, a project is at a standstill,” he explained. “You can wait for windows, if you have to, but without the roof, the project can’t progress.”

The challenge for TEC is to

achieve desired growth, but without sacrificing high standards for customer service. There have been some growing pains for the two partners, but they have made adjustments and investments that have led to better lead times and delivery schedules.

Among the investments has been an expansion of the second shift, the hiring of additional sales staff, acquisition of an additional truck, and purchase of a new saw designed for cutting small, more complicated pieces.

The saw, like the other investments, was a risk for a new/old company with substantial debt, but one the company needed to take if it was to move forward.

“We had just bought the business, we had a lot of debt from that acquisition, and we were still in an incubation stage, but a \$120,000 saw was something we

had to do,” Henley explained, adding that the same thought process motivated purchase of a fifth truck several months later. “We had to address some needs to get the company where we wanted to go, and we weren’t afraid to take those steps.”

### On Top of Things

Looking forward, the partners say they are contemplating moves into new, related product markets, such as wall panels. But for now, the focus is on making trusses and gaining trust — from customers.

In that respect, this business is really no different than golf or most other sectors. Indeed, as Henley said, it comes down to making products that perform as advertised.

That’s how TEC plans to be a winner in this highly competitive game.