

Billings Businessman Named SBA's Montana Small Business Person of the Year



Hollis A. (Bill) Mills of 2 M Company, Inc. in Billings has been named SBA's 2008 Montana Small Business Person of the Year. Bill Mills will be honored during the National Small Business Week event in Washington, DC, April 21-25, 2008, along with representatives from every state. They will again be honored, along with other outstanding award winners, at the Montana Small Business Week Award Banquet ceremony on May 1, 2008, in Billings.

Thirty years ago, Hollis "Bill" Mills and Chester Majors (the two "M"s) together founded a company known as 2M Company, Inc. At the time, Mills was the manager of a water well wholesale supplier, and Majors was a factory representative for Wade Rain, an agricultural irrigation manufacturer. Both men were tired of working for companies that only thought about the bottom line. They wanted to build a water specialty wholesale business around the principal that the customer always comes first.

They wanted to have fun doing it and be able to give back to the people who make a business a success - the customer.

Armed with this vision and founding philosophy, along with a little bit of savings, the two "Ms" obtained an SBA guaranteed loan and established 2M Company, Inc.'s home office in Billings, MT. The company, which specialized in pumps, water wells, well monitoring, sprinkler systems, pipeline designs, booster systems, residential, municipal and industrial sewage systems, realized \$1.5 million dollars in total sales and paid wages of \$100,000, during its "first" year of operation.

After surviving the "first" year, 2M provided the industry with a number of other "firsts". They were the first wholesaler in the industry to provide delivery cargo vans, a toll free number, cash discounts, dealer meetings, and trip promotions. In addition to being the "first" to offer factory fly-ins, Saturday morning hours, extended summer hours, a website, on-line ordering, and build programs.

Through the years, 2M expanded to accommodate demand for their product, philosophy and services. In 1993, Chester Majors retired from the company and Bill Mills became sole owner. Today the business is a family business. After graduating from MSU-B, Bill's son, H.A. (Buzz) Mills Jr., joined the company fifteen years ago and was named President and General Manager of 2M in March 2007.

Currently, 2M employs over 90 people in its nine branch locations throughout Montana, Idaho, Colorado, and New Mexico. All nine locations are strategically situated to allow for maximum diversification of economic markets and climates as well as being positioned in high growth areas. These nine locations serve over 3,500 customers in the Rocky Mountain Region and each location employs the company's philosophy of delivering "legendary service". To this end, 2M has a full-time training manager who works with customers and employees on product knowledge, application and design, along with general business skills. In addition, each branch is staffed appropriately with managers, sales and warehouse staff.

2M has established itself as the employer of choice within its industry and provides an excellent work atmosphere for its employees. Additionally, the company offers its employees attractive benefits including a 401(k) plan, profit sharing, paid vacations, company vehicles and health insurance. Bill Mills implemented and has fostered a business climate that provides opportunity for every employee to better their career within the company ranks. This concept improves company morale and increases productivity throughout the organization.

As the industry rapidly changes with high-tech electronics leading product innovation, 2M has recognized the need for increased employee and customer on-going training. In response to this, 2M's new office headquarters in Billings, which opened its doors in March 2007, is fully equipped with a training room and landscape that provides a demo area for turf and pond products.

2M has plans for three more locations in the immediate future, with a Phoenix, AZ branch opening in the first quarter of 2008, and six more long-term. Bill Mills is steadfast in his commitment to increase the company's market presence in the states where branches are currently located and in states where they see potential for new branches.

Since 2000, company sales have increased from \$21 million and a payroll of \$2.0 million, to over \$44 million and a payroll of \$4.5 million in 2007. 2M is focused on maintaining a 15% growth rate and fully expects to have sales exceed \$100 million within the next 5 years.

Mills' biggest challenge in running the company has been living up to the philosophy and commitment to put the customer's wants and needs first. However, Mills and the 2M team have found a way to successfully achieve this, they have fun doing it, and have created a legacy of "Legendary Service" to be proud of.

Bill Mills' commitment to giving back extends well beyond his company and customers. Over the years he has been instrumental in helping many other entrepreneurs start up businesses by offering his business experience, expertise and in some cases start-up capital. Bill has contributed substantial support to numerous Billings community projects. He is actively involved in his local church and is a driving force in its' recent sizeable expansion. Carol Willis, Vice President of First Interstate Bank in Billings nominated Mills for this award.