

A vital member of Western Canada's contractor community



Manitoba's St. Vital Electric

With locations in Winnipeg and Calgary, St. Vital Electric is a growing company serving a variety of residential and commercial clients. Company president Rob Gordon is leading St. Vital into its fifth decade of business, and there's every indication that SVE will continue to expand far into the future.

"In the mid-1980s, St. Vital Electric started to pursue more commercial and industrial work," says Gordon, "and by the mid-1990s, SVE was growing by 15 to 25 per cent each year, reaching current sales of \$2.5 million annually." A vital member of western Canada's contractor community, SVE now numbers 35 employees and 20 service vehicles in two provinces.

Tracking Manitoba's rising star

The present scope of operations is indeed impressive given St. Vital Electric's humble beginnings. Founded by Rob's father Keith, it largely remained a one-man outfit (with occasional help from an assistant) until the late 1970s. Working on-and-off with his father since the age of 13, Rob served his apprenticeship with other

contractors, then rejoined the family firm full-time in 1984 as a journeyman electrician.

This career has enabled Gordon to experience significant professional rewards. "The thing I enjoy most about being an electrical contractor is the challenge," he says, adding, "You always have to think of the next step and be proactive. The challenge of growing the company is really gratifying."

A typical day for Gordon includes less hands-on work than in previous years, as he now assumes a busy management role. Confidence in the abilities and experience of his employees allows him to focus on SVE's strategic direction.

An example of that direction is using the company's service vehicles as rolling billboards to advertise St. Vital's services. It's certainly hard to miss the company's unique fleet of cars and trucks, which includes a Buick Grand National—an outrageously powerful, turbocharged 1980s muscle car—and a classic, fully restored 1968 Chevy Suburban. Gordon has even ordered two fuel-sipping Smart micro cars for economical estimation visits. The flashy yellow, orange and black colour scheme makes it easy to remember St. Vital Electric when you require an electrical contractor.

One of SVE's latest campaigns is called Homepro Residential Electrical Services. In addition to regular commercial jobs, this initiative was launched to handle the increasing number of calls from homeowners.


Dealing with market forces

An electrical contractor can be plagued by any number of problems, but a lack of customers is not among them where SVE is concerned. Rather, Gordon finds himself dealing with a lack of trained tradespeople to join his team. "There is a huge shortage of electricians in Western Canada," he explains, "and with many major projects online, the situation is similar to that of the 1970s when there was more work than people."

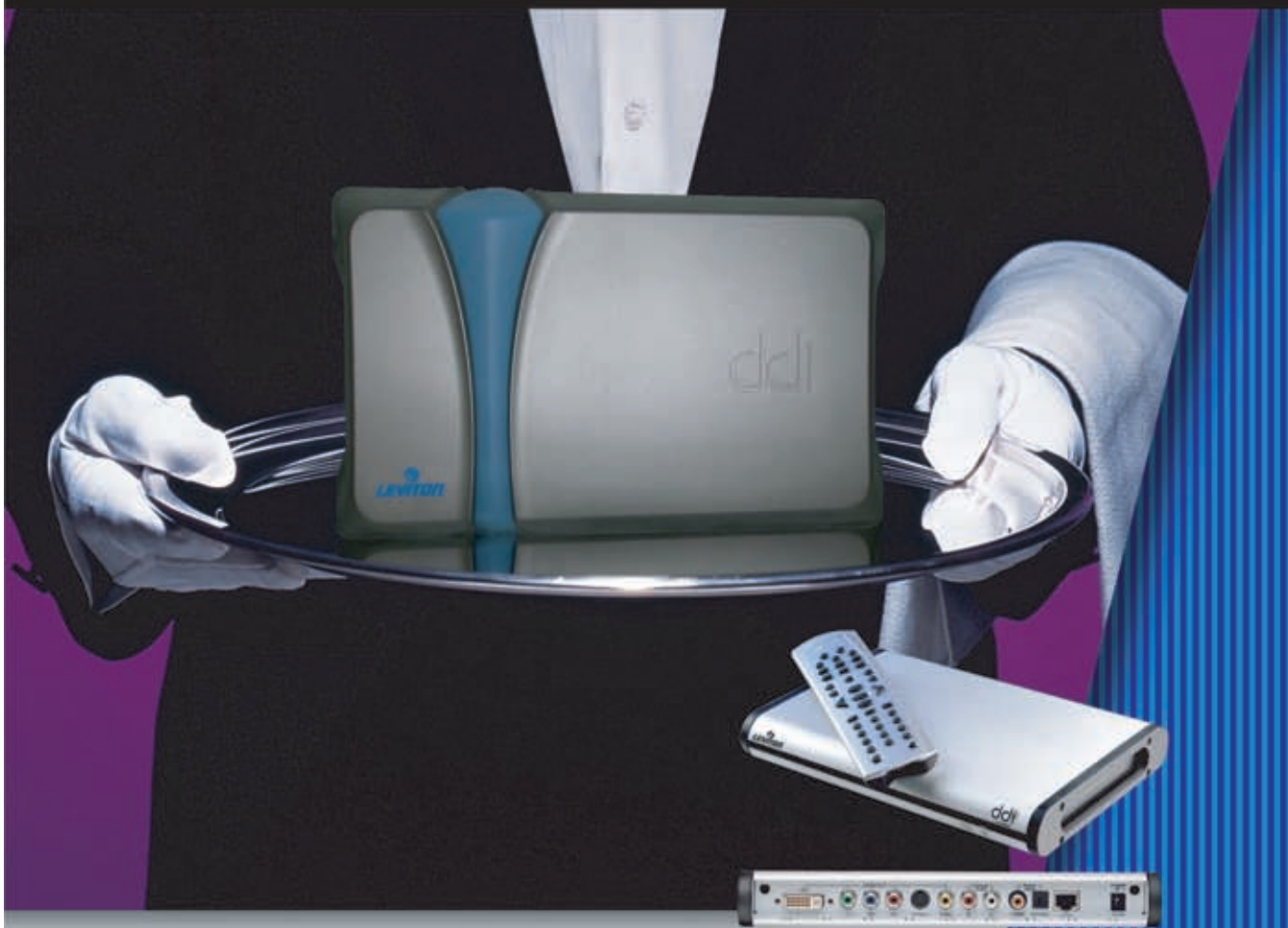
However, there is a light shining at the end of the proverbial tunnel. "Manitoba's antiquated apprentice ratios have recently been resolved, and this should improve the workforce in the next four to five years," says Gordon confidently.

Some of the other challenges SVE faces are not unlike those faced by all electrical contractors: specifically, government red tape (especially at the provincial and municipal levels) and keeping current with the price of materials. "The cost of PVC, copper and steel changes on a weekly basis and must be constantly monitored," Gordon points out.

We asked Gordon what advice he had for young people considering their career options, to which he emphatically answers: "Now is the ideal time to become a tradesperson. There's such a shortage of electricians, plumbers, and the like." To help address this labour demand, Gordon sits on the advisory committee of his local community college. His goal is to streamline educational programs and make what electrical students learn during pre-employment as relevant and practical as possible.

Regardless of market difficulties, St. Vital Electric's employees are up to the task. Blending into a unified team, SVE's electricians frequently participate in continuing education programs to ensure they stay on top of new technology and safety advancements. Their efforts have made SVE a great success. Teamwork and sound leadership give St. Vital Electric a vital edge—a formula that will allow the company to grow for decades to come. 

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