

With a promise of truthfulness and reliability, True Inspection Services, LLC is providing verifiable construction management, administration and inspection services



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Interview conducted by:
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CEOCFO: Mr. Coutts, what is the focus for True Inspection Services, LLC today?

Mr. Coutts: As an engineering inspection company, our focus is to provide for customer and clients a reliable, truthful service. We are basically a fifty-member company. We have a whole load of people that are fully engaged in the company, which I am very happy for.

CEOCFO: How do you get that engagement from your people? What have you developed in the culture of the company so that you can say that with confidence?

Mr. Coutts: When you come back to the basic laws, just like the laws of gravity and the basic principles, everyone wants to be a part of a team. Everyone wants to feel wanted and important. When it starts at the top then there is something that happens, when everyone feels they are member, just like they are a member of your body. If you have a hammer and you hit your finger then all the members of your body go to help that finger. The body will work together. It starts at the top. What has happened is that I have very good people who want to be a part of something and they are willing to work. We do not necessarily crack a whip or anything. It is more like because you have examples of people that are engaged and giving themselves that becomes the standard.

CEOCFO: Would you tell us a bit about the types of projects that you take on?

Mr. Coutts: We take on a lot of government projects. When I started I did bridge inspections for the State of Ohio and it was the coatings inspection first. We have the name True Inspection Services. What happened in the 1990s is that there was a good number of contractors and inspectors that did work for the state. Some of the inspectors were state employees, but they went to jail because there was some falsification of documents. Just the short of it; the contractor had put in a bid. He was to blast the bridge and put all the environmental protections up to protect the streams and everything. However, instead of blasting off the existing coatings they just pressure washed everything and then painted over the old. The inspectors falsified their records and documents. The contractors were paid as if they did whole bridge and because of that the Feds got involved. People lost their jobs and people went to prison. Therefore, when I started the company I decided to call it True Inspection Services. The name True Inspection Services stands for truth, integrity and stewardship. That is our core. That is what we are about. Now we are working in eleven of the twelve districts in the state. Of course we do inspections for concrete and paving; we basically do the whole gamut of construction inspection for the state of Ohio. We also have private clients that we do work for. We do over one hundred and twenty-five projects a year.

CEOCFO: Do you foresee expanding outside of Ohio?

Mr. Coutts: That is exactly what we are doing right now! We had a strategic planning session at the end of last year and that was in our five-year goal. In the first year we are basically going to go into Maryland, so that is on the books.

CEOCFO: Why Maryland? How do you get there from Ohio?

Mr. Coutts: We have a network of consultants and engineers and people that we work for and many of them are in other states, such as Maryland and Pennsylvania. They have told us, "Why don't you come?! You would be excellent." We are a (minority) DBE firm, and they said, "We need the type of talent that you guys bring to the table in other states." Therefore, if we go to the other states, we already have arrangements with consultants and we have work that we can do.

CEOCFO: When you are doing an inspection is there a set list of items you review? What might you look at that less knowledgeable people do not?

Mr. Coutts: There are two things that we do that are a little bit different. One thing is that if you look like a good inspector, chances are that you have made the first step. You are a good inspector, you look like it. You have got to look the part first. In other words, you should be neat and clean. When the client rides by, they should be able to look over and say, "There is my inspection staff, there is one of them right there." The way we do that is that we make sure we have a hard hat on and other appropriate personal protective equipment. However, paying attention to details that everything is neat and clean; keep your instruments clean, everything must be clean. That is how we can kind of tell. Usually most contractors, if you are talking about bridges and painting and things like that, they do not clean things. Another thing that we always look at is the vehicle. We do not put "hoopties" out in the field. We put something that looks like a good inspection vehicle. We have actually had people that have said, "Are you guys hiring?" We asked, "What for?" And they said, "You guys have nice trucks, everything is clean and people speak well of your company! Do you have any openings?" Those are a couple of things that we pay attention to and it is something that is not huge, but it definitely does mean something for our people and for our image.

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CEOCFO: Is it difficult to attract people today or because of your reputation are you able to find the best of the best?

Mr. Coutts: Right now, it is hard to get good people. It is hard. They are just not out there. In our line of work and profession, there are certifications and it might take six months to a year to have all of your certifications current and to have what you need so that you are able to be what we call an "ODOT approved inspector". It is hard to find good people. Many times what we end up doing is what I call "home grown". If you find a person that pays attention to detail and they have a sense of responsibility, then we encourage them and we even pay for their training. Therefore, we will start them off in the training program and we have many that are on our staff that we have had a full-time person that calls people, lines up training for them and gets them in the groove so that they can be inspectors on our projects. However, it takes time to bring that in and to keep that going, so we have a very difficult time finding good people. However, the other side of the coin for us is that we want the best and when you want the best, you have to pay them well within the industry standard. You must have good vacation and other employee benefits, you have to have good at work atmosphere; there are many things that we are constantly doing. Our employees fill out surveys of what we can do better and the things that they like. We just changed our referral incentives for personnel. We started out doing two hundred dollars and went to five hundred dollars. We just increased that to one thousand dollars. Those are the kinds of things that we are doing to help us get good people.

CEOCFO: Do you find when you are doing an inspection that the results are acted upon? Do you see the follow through or does it bother you that sometimes clients do not do what they should?

Mr. Coutts: Sometimes it is a little bit of a slap in the face when we are gathering data and giving information to the client and then the client says, "We know you are right and we know it is like that, but we are going to let them go ahead and do this". We are doing our job so that we alleviate problems and then the client turns around because of time or in some cases it is a matter of do you look at something and say, "Some is better than none," or do you look at and say, "If I cannot have everything then I do not want anything. I want nothing." It is just how you look at it. Sometimes our records and our documents have spoken for themselves, and there have been times where we have really saved a client money because of our documents. That is something we do pride ourselves in. For example, one of our inspectors was on a

project and they were painting a water storage tower tank. Long story short, the contractor was using the paint and was spraying it and the paint was not sticking to the surface correctly. Therefore, the contractor kept trying and he tried different things, so they called the paint manufacturer. The paint manufacturer came to visit the site. Our inspector was keeping all the correct documents, because many times if you do not have the correct humidity, if the humidity is too high, then the manufacturer says he cannot guarantee the paint or if the surface is dirty. There are just certain things where the paint manufacturer will say, "It is not my paint, because you did not do this, this and this." However, because our documents were impeccable and the paint manufacturer came out and he saw our inspector out there and he saw our documents laid out, the paint manufacturer had to bring out new paint and he had to pay to fix it. It was actually the paint that, was bad. However, you would never get that if you had not had the proper documentation and if you had not taken the test properly. That is why we pride ourselves in that and I think that gets you work in the long run.

CEOCFO: Does the DBE certification help, both with government and with private industry, or not as much as you might have thought?

Mr. Couts: I have to say that the DBE program is fantastic! It actually gives you a chance to perform and that is what I like about the program. If a contractor or a consultant or whomever will say, "You are a small company, so we will give you a chance," when you get a chance you had best shine! You had better put your best foot forward and you should shine! Therefore, that gives you an opportunity. On the other hand, if someone is just looking for a handout, they do not want to do the work, they just want to make money and they do not want to do anything, then the program is not going to work for them and if it does work, it will be for a short while. They will end up either being disbarred or having some other negative things happen. However, I have seen a good number of companies that the DBE program has been a help to. For me, I have clients that say, "Barry, we do not care if you are DBE, or whatever; we hire you because you do good work and we like you! That is why we hire!" That is on the private side. On the government side, the DBE program gave me the opportunity to step into a project and show them what I could do, then there is a good chance that I would not have gotten the chance. We started out as a DBE and we were a subconsultant to everyone. Now, we have grown to the point where fifty percent of the time, we are prime! We are priming projects. We have been awarded projects where there was no DBE requirement on it. There were two projects, one had a DBE and the EDGE goal and one did not. We were awarded the one that did not have the EDGE and DBE because they knew that they did not have any fear about us. They looked at us as a consultant that can do the work and then someone else was able to do the other one. Therefore, I could not say more about the program and I think it works in a very good way.

CEOCFO: How do you spend your time as president of True Inspection Services, LLC? What do you do day to day?

Mr. Couts: Yesterday, for example, there was a small electrical project in Columbus and they wanted someone to do part time inspection. When I first started the company, I worked for this electrical engineer. It is not big money, but when I do these small projects I am in front of clients. It was for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. I was with five other consultants. I still work on projects now and then. I will actually go and help get the project, but I will give it to someone else to do. As I said, we just had a strategic planning meeting. It was a three-day session. I am constantly trying to find better ways to run the company. I have no problem at all coming in and working every day. There is a much to do. I am trying to do more of being the face of the company with more golf outings and mingling. However, I have no problem at all having plenty to do!

