



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

Season 2, Episode 2

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Guest: Mike McLeod

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Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

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Katherine: Welcome to *The Fix*, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. *The Fix* is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

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All right, Doug, we have a really exciting guest today. I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

Doug: I'm telling you, Katherine, we had a great season so far this year and last year, we're bringing in a lot of different folks to explain the different journeys they took. Today is just going to show you one more of those paths.

Katherine: I know this is a really unique approach for us because we haven't really had a conversation in this sector. I think it's really going to give us some highlights, even more into how big the trades are and how vast they are.

Doug: Absolutely. Our guest today, Mike, he is going to take us on a journey because he is an extension of Oatey.

Katherine: Yes, absolutely. Great lead-in. I want to introduce today, our guest, who is Mike McLeod, the owner and managing principal of Harry Warren of Georgia. Hey Mike, welcome to *The Fix*.

Mike McLeod: Hey guys. Good morning. Thanks for having me.

Doug: Ah, you're welcome. We're very happy that you were taking some time out of your busy day for us.

Katherine: Yes, absolutely. This is so fun. Mike, if you wouldn't mind let's go back. I'm sure it's only been a couple of years if you don't mind telling us your career journey and what you've been doing so far, and where you are today.

Mike McLeod: I've been in the business for 22 years. Like most, I went to college, I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but you needed to go to college. Coming out of that, I was looking at opportunities. Through school, did a lot of restaurant work, waiting tables, which is fitting for the sales industry where you learn a lot of different personalities. You learn multitask, but really looking for what that career path was going to be. Coming out of school, I had a close family friend that owned a manufacturer rep agency down in Florida.

Didn't really know what that was, didn't understand. Knew he was in the plumbing business but wasn't really sure what that day-to-day looked like. I asked him if I could come in and learn some business experience, as I was trying to find out what that next path would be. Came in and started doing some inside sales and learned what the manufacturer rep was in the plumbing business and really felt a big draw to the business. It was a really unique industry. It was a really fun variety of interactions that we got to deal with.

You had a very specific customer base that we got to focus on. Through that process, I worked inside sales for a couple of years, and then he had an opportunity where he was going to open up an agency in Georgia. I was offered to help come up and open up that agency. That's when we became Harry Warren of Georgia.

Katherine: Oh, great.

Mike McLeod: Through that process, we merged with another company, brought on some additional people and we went through a rapid time of growth. We really just built the business up, really focused on the diversity of our sales force. We were commercial and residential, showroom and it really just grew from there. We managed that operation for him for 10 years and then the other manager and myself, we got the opportunity to buy the business in 2013. I've been the owner of Harry Warren of Georgia since that time.

Katherine: Oh, how exciting. What a great path to go from being boots on the ground. You can literally say to your associates, "I wouldn't ask you to do anything I haven't done," because you have done everything from getting in and hitting the ground floor to helping stand up a new division. Which it sounds like that time that you were in Georgia was when they were booming as well. I can imagine.

Mike McLeod: It really was. Moving here in 2003, we got all the excitement of growing a business from the ground up. Really learning how to go out and create an identity from scratch as opposed to taking over a different business and a territory that had been around for 60 years. Really learning how we can be a unique atmosphere and an entity in the market. It was incredibly rewarding and it's been an amazing ride. We went through the 2008 and had to learn really what the bad times look like and what you got to do to succeed and keep the doors open.

Then we came out in 2013 when we took over ownership and really learned how to manage a growth time in the business. How we used that time to diversify our business, add to our sales team, and really provide companies like Oatey the best opportunities we can in the market.

Katherine: Which is really cool.

Doug: I have a question. Oatey as we seek out our reps, we are obviously looking for the best of the best. There is no second best when we're finding reps.

Katherine: You got it.

Doug: Mike and his team, obviously are some of the best. One of the questions I have, we talk about diversity, what process do you go through, Mike, when you decide what products you would like to rep?

Mike McLeod: That's a great question. What it is, is when we look at it, rep agencies is built on different layers themselves. We have an inside sales team, we have an outside sales team and then you've got your owner and management level. What we take with the manufacturers we partner with, are what is their direction and opportunity for growth in a market. Is it a mature market where manufacturers are just trying to maintain their share? Or is there a lot of upward mobility if we put the right strategies and people in place.

Through agencies like ours, when we're looking to grow, that's why we don't just have a residential focus. We don't have just a commercial focus. We are looking to have the most robust sales force for a company like Oatey, that's looking to grow themselves. It's not just with, "Hey, here's new products for residential," which they do great at. It's how does Oatey go out and expand into a commercial. How does Oatey look at new products through acquisitions and innovations to expand into the showroom in the design segments?

From that, as we look at growing, we look at opportunities with our partner manufacturers of their growth strategies and opportunities for the long term.

Katherine: That's great. I even want to take just probably a step back and for maybe some of our listeners who don't know or understand what is a manufacturer's rep. Where do you play in between the manufacturer and that engineer, the architect, the plumber? Can you talk a little bit about how that is such an important role and what a manufacturer rep is and does for vendors and also the trades?

Mike McLeod: It's really that conduit in between the two. What we are is an extension of the manufacturer's salesforce. We're their eyes and ears and voice out
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on the street based on where their needs and goals and new products are but we're also bringing the information back from the field. We've all seen manufacturers that may bring out a product and they've done all the development in a back room but they haven't gotten that VOC voice of the customer.

What we should be doing is helping provide that information, bringing back in that contractor engineer wholesaler perspective of where the needs are, and make sure we're developing around that.

Katherine: Sure, yes.

Mike McLeod: Those interactions we have daily with our sales team, their daily routine, and opportunities look like calling on a wholesale distributor for our partnership. Make sure we have the right products and support in the market. We're calling on contractors, doing trainings, doing the pull-through, jumping through hoops to make sure we're helping them problem-solve especially in today's environment when the supply chain is so stressed. We're calling on engineers and architects from the specification side.

Making sure we have the prioritization of being listed or basis of design. We're calling on builders. We're calling up school facilities where we have a lot of different touchpoints that all funnel back into what we call the demand creation process. We're not just a sales team. We're not just trying to make a quota, trying to sell you an order and move on. We're trying to make sure that we're creating demand in the market for Oatey. So that when that customer has a choice based on all the options given that they come with Oatey based on these support mechanisms we're outperforming.

Doug: That's fantastic. You know what? I always try to think of the perfect question that I want to ask each one of our guests. I've been really dwelling on this one question.

Katherine: All right. Let's hear it.

Doug: Mike's going to be able to drive this home for us, okay? Mike, one of the things that we talked about all last season and this season, are what are the multiple opportunities in the plumbing industry? A lot of folks think, "Okay if I enter the plumbing industry, I got to be a plumber." What we're trying to show our audience is the fact that there's a lot of different avenues in that plumbing. Now being a wholesaler, can you explain to us all the different trainings and visitations. How many hours you guys spend learning plumbing systems.

What I feel is if that person out there in our audience doesn't necessarily want to be a plumber, he can stay within the industry. Go the path that maybe you and your team have gone, but utilize a lot of that knowledge from the plumbing industry itself. Learn about rough ends, learn about code, learn about reading prints, that type of thing. You don't just deal with the wholesaler. You're an extension, like you said, of the contractor, the architects, the engineers, you run the whole gamut. How do you go about your training and getting your real-life experiences out there?

Mike: That's perfect and that's a lot of what we've done. I think if there's something y'all can look at as a recurrent theme in all your episodes, it's really that emphasis on training. Getting that end-user with product in their hands and the familiarity that gives that long-lasting loyalty to a brand like Oatey. What we do is at all those levels, Doug, we go through and we'll do training at the contractor shop. We'll bring people to our office where we have a training center and certainly Oatey's got a top-notch training center up there for a factory visit.

There's not a lot of guys that can say they've done a solvent weld class next to a lot of others where we'll go through and do a pressure test afterward and create a little competitive atmosphere. That's something that they will always remember after visiting the factory in the facility and really make sure that we've got that built-in. All those areas, it is in such demand through the trade associations, through PHCC, through the ASA for the American Supply Association.

There is such a focus on providing resources to our customers and to our partners that allows us to go and make sure that we are hands-on and face to face and providing that education. We do it every day, every week at every opportunity we can get.

Doug: I've had exposure to Mike and his team in certain situations. I can tell you that Mike and his team, want to understand plumbing. They don't just want to sell a part. They want to know how that part works. They want to know how people misuse that part and then they want to be problem solvers as an extension from Oatey. They're technically technical technicians of plumbing, without actually touching the plumbing.

Mike: Exactly. Right. We have multiple, salespeople on our staff that have come from a wholesale background and have come from a contracting background so they've got those real-world experiences. They've got that familiarity built-in and making sure when we're in front of a contractor class, whether it's new construction or service, we can go through and empathize with what they come across. Also make sure we're going through a best practice of what we're seeing from any of our manufacturers and really get that hands-on, feel for it.

Katherine: Mike what would you say kind of sets your agency and your group apart from the others? What do you think you do a little bit differently or something that really allows your growth and your success to happen?

Mike: I think there's a couple of foundations for that. Part of it is really the diversity of our group. From a technical aspect, we've got members of our group that are absolutely dedicated and focused at the commercial segment. We've got groups that have a great background on residential and commodity-type products for where their focus lies. Then you've got to showroom-specific personnel that understands that. What we're not trying to do is make one person wear multiple hats to where they have to go in because we're so diverse today.

So are our manufacturers on what we're trying to provide support, that you can't have one person, one-size-fit-all. We need to have those resources in-house that provides them the ability to get the support they're looking for in a very specific manner. From that, we also really dive deep into the way that we go out and we

communicate. Today is more about solution selling because of the supply chain, because of the volume that's being demanded right now. Instead of saying, "Hey, we don't have that product right now. It'll be three to four weeks," cetera.

"Hey, here's something that will work because of X, Y, and Z. Here's something, if you need it now, we feel like we can go out. Train your group on and make sure we're giving you a solution within your needs."

Katherine: That's so key right now, especially in the market that we're in which we're probably going to be in for a while of just how to continue to do that solution-selling. What do you think is the most rewarding part of your job?

Mike: I think it really is the variety of what we get to experience like others, I knew that we did, I didn't want to come to a job every day and just sit in a cubicle and do the repetitious routine.

Katherine: I second that.

Mike: We get a lot of great variety from face-to-face human interaction. It could be making sales calls at a customer's shop. It could be bringing them up for a factory visit. It could be the trade association type counter days, and events that we get to do. A lot of variety built-in is amazing. One of the other things, when I got started was going out and making sales calls with some of the veteran sales guys and realizing from the start, when we went into a customer's shop, these were friends. These weren't making a sales call and moving on to the next.

These are guys that talked about their families talked about the ball game before we really got into any kind of product. Now that I've been into it for 22 years, you really stop and appreciate those relationships that we've built. I think that's probably one of the most amazing parts of this segment, is, it is all predicated on relationships. It is about people buy from who they want. They do have some decisions on what direction. It's usually people buy from who they know, and those relationships are the foundation of what we do in this business.

Katherine: For sure.

Doug: I'm going to add to that. It's not only who Mike it's who you trust. Here's the thing, I can go to Best Buy today and I can buy something from a salesperson, and guess what? I just made a visit. When I buy something from one of our reps, I'm creating a relationship. I'm trusting that they're going to sell me the best products in the industry that are offered through my wholesalers. If I have a problem, I know that rep is there for me. He's not just there to sell me an HDMI cord today.

Mike: It really is. It's all about credibility. That should be where it starts, every conversation is making sure you're the credible resource they can rely on. Most of this is not about if things go wrong, but when, and are you there to help support them through that process. Don't give them a quick answer. Don't give them a bad answer, give them the right answer. Make sure that they know that you're there to support them based on all those factors involved.

Doug: It's like anything in life as a contractor, Mike, when life was good, I never talked to you but I wanted to know that if life went bad for me on a project or something I had somebody to help walk me through the process. Help stand by me,-

Katherine: He had your back.

Doug: -give the guidance. Absolutely, he had my back. You know what, you and your team emulate that. That's what's so special about you guys.

Mike: It really is. Today more than ever, like you mentioned, it's a hard environment, even though the demand is so high. It's great but it is tough because of all the variables in the market right now. Between what products are available, what quantity, what transportation issues get thrown at us. It is about what do we do to insulate some of those day-to-day issues? How do we go to bat for our customers and our manufacturers to smooth the process and make everybody feel at least like they're being helped to the best of our ability?

Katherine: One of the questions that I had for you was to talk through some of the common misconceptions about sales reps that you hear and just that, "Oh, they're just salespeople," or, "Sales crews are easy." I was going to have you answer it but I think you've really told the story very well through your communications today. Of just all the different variables and the challenges and the wearing multiple hats and sometimes selling sometimes solution-based. Sometimes you're there to help figure out a problem.

Is there anything that you'd want to summarize that you really want to tell people about the career within being a manufacturer's rep and in that sales function?

Mike: Really, it's an amazing segment to be in because we get to really advocate for our manufacturers. We get to make sure that their vision and needs are implemented in the market. We get to pull those relationships together and use all those years of building that credibility, building that product knowledge. Really go to bat for our manufacturers and our customers' needs combined. It's an amazing position to be in where we can really feel both sides of that business and make sure that the contractor, the wholesaler, the manufacturer are all getting the right product at the right place at the right time.

Katherine: That's great and I imagine in just from my experience with working with the team members, that there's a lot of tenures that happens on manufacturing website. There's a lot of legacy there and a lot of knowledge, which is so valuable as the market changes and the new products come on and codes change. To have that type of knowledge is probably pretty key too.

Mike: It is. We've got some great veterans and like other parts of the business right now, you really want to bring in some youth. You want to build a bench to make sure that we're taken care of. That product knowledge and that knowledge that some of those veterans, once they retire, we need to make sure we've brought in the youth and really absorb that. Take the best of those foundations and make sure that we sustain that.

On the wholesale side, you've got a lot today where a click of a button and the other opportunities for online are all there, but it really doesn't replace what that face-to-face interaction is and where that relationship-building part of our business still sustains. It's still a very steadfast part of our business.

Katherine: I would agree.

Doug: Absolutely. I always say one of the most valuable daily experiences that I or one of my men would have is when they went to the counter because that person there is giving you the raw truth.

[laughter]

If that sucks, they're going to tell you it sucks and if it works, they're going to say, "Hey, you should try this. It works well."

Mike: They will, and then that's what it is. It's making sure we're getting that feed on the street and you should be at job sites. You should be doing trainings in the field. You should be bringing those quality contractors up to the factory. Make sure that we are all listening and understanding where the needs are and make sure that we have a solution to that process.

Katherine: I want to talk just a little bit about the trades and I just have a couple ending questions for you here. My first one is as you step back and you look at the trades, what do you see as your hopes and dreams for this industry and where it goes in the future?

Mike: I think I really want to make sure that we are helping all these entities that are trying to get new blood into this business. We've talked about it with a lot of the veterans that are going to retire. Do we have the proper amount of youth and apprenticeships being supported into this business? Through our local PHCC, through our different avenues of our associations. Are we doing the proper things as a manufacturer, and reps combined to help them support those apprenticeship programs?

Give them a quality educational program to really excite these youthful guys coming into the business to say, "Look this is a great business. You don't have to go to four-year if that's not your path. Let's get you into the trades. Let's talk about where we can support this business at a very high level?"

Katherine: That's great. Then lastly is, every single one of our podcast, we try to take some action after it. It's not just a bunch of lip service. It's a great dialogue, but we also want to be actionable. It can be a follow-up for later, but I definitely want to see where you can see that Oatey can do a little bit more to help in that area. What could we do? Can we help sponsor event at your local PHCC? Could we do something to support? I know we've done a project in your area with the Miracle Mechanical Project.

We've been trying to support where we can but I definitely would love to hear back from you how we could help a little bit more.

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Mike: I think that's absolutely something that is right here and right now. As we've got these schools and educational opportunities, I think it's putting together, helping them create their agendas. Helping Oatey be the brand that these guys see and feel and install first because there's a lot of loyalty built-in to being first. One in the contractor and the apprenticeships' hands that you hear it all the time that these guys that they put it in because that's the way their dad did it and that's the way their grandfather did it.

That's where we should be at the front and center of the support trade associations and apprenticeship programs to make sure that we and Oatey are at the forefront of helping these guys really come into the trade.

Katherine: Well, I agree and I appreciate your time today, Mike, your insight. It's been so nice to have you on get to learn a little bit more about your story. A little bit more about your agency story, and how we can continue to grow this sector. Doug, any final thoughts from you?

Doug: I just want to thank you Mike for taking some time out of your day because I know you are a busy guy. I have had the privilege of getting to know some of your team members a little bit more. I can tell everyone that the dedication from your organization is second to none. I appreciate the fact that you're an extension of us and always been a pleasure to talk and get to know you.

Mike: Great guys. Well, thanks for having me on love the podcast and I really appreciate y'all letting me come in and talk a little bit about the rep agency.

Katherine: You got it. Thanks so much. Have a great day.

Doug: Bye-bye.

Mike: You too. Thank you.

Katherine: Thanks for joining us on this episode of *The Fix*. Be sure to follow us on your favorite podcast platform so you don't miss our next conversation dropping every Wednesday. If you have feedback about the show or a topic you'd like to see covered, send us an e-mail at thefix@oatey.com or give us a shout-out on social media. We would love to connect with you. Don't forget, you can get your daily fix by visiting oatey.com and we'll catch you next time.

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