



# Empire State Associates

By Mark Bruno

*While the leaders of Empire State Associates (ESA) do not label themselves as the perfect company, there is no doubt that the Clifton Park, N.Y.-based manufacturer's rep agency does exude certain qualities that distinguish it within the PHCP industry. At the very least, it clearly solidifies the reasoning behind their winning the ASA News Top Brass Manufacturers Representative of the Year award.*

The company was first founded in the late 1940s by **Eric Wellisch** — a Czechoslovakian Jewish immigrant who escaped imprisonment from a Nazi concentration camp — and operated out of a home office in New York City until the early 1950s. According to company history, Wellisch lived in Jamaica, Queens, and traveled to upstate New York weekly. In the early 1950s Wellisch was joined by **Greg Magratten**, and the company was named Wellisch Magratten Associates. The two partners carried on a successful business tradition for many years, later bringing a third individual into the company in 1974 — **Dale Norris** of Clifton Park, N.Y.

During his first few years with the firm, Norris, a graduate of the University of Cincinnati and former salesman for the Universal Rundle Co., agreed to purchase Wellisch's share in the company, and ESA became known as Magratten Norris Associates.

"Prior to coming over to Wellisch Magratten, I had some concerns because I was unsure of how 'safe' it was to run a rep agency," says Norris. "Well, I soon came

to the conclusion that you're only as safe as 30 days — the length of a contract."

Magratten and Norris continued to work from their homes and in 1979 merged the agency with **Jim Martin**. Martin's agency sold products in the water works industry that included sewer and water pipes.

"Actually, it was an unusual business arrangement," says Norris. "Jim was a rep who was paid commission in the territories where he represented our lines, and he paid us commission in the territories where we carried his lines."

According to Norris, many of the agency's manufacturers were surprised that such an unusual business practice worked for the firm, but it was business as usual until 1986, when **Bill Frenzel** of Manlius, N.Y. came on board. At this point the company was named Magratten Norris Martin & Frenzel Associates. Soon afterwards, however, Magratten expressed an interest in retirement, so Frenzel bought out his share and the company was renamed Empire State Associates. The firm currently covers upstate New York and Erie, Pa.

"The basic reason we renamed the company as we did in 1987 was so that no matter what partner came in or left, we wouldn't have to keep changing the name," says Frenzel.

As he and Norris continued to take ESA forward through 1986-87, both principals decided that the addition of a main sales office was needed. That same year the main facility was opened in Clifton Park.

## Successful business strategy

Empire State Associates is successful today because of a few basic philosophies that were carried down from the firm's original founders and perpetuated by Norris and Frenzel. The first is a dedication to the welfare of its 11 employees. **Carolyn Norris**, Dale's wife and controller for ESA, believes that the company and its employees are a second family.

"We have very loyal employees who are conscientious and hard working," she says. "Our company was honored to win the [ASA News 2000 Top Brass] award because of our employees and the fact that we have an excellent partner in Bill Frenzel."

Carolyn's many duties include mostly bookkeeping functions such as payroll and accounting. However, it is her role as "goodwill ambassador" and "employee relations specialist" that really lets the company's employees know how appreciated they are by management.

"I think of myself as the company's employee morale booster," she says. "I plan birthday lunches and try to pick up gifts and treats along the way to make their jobs more fun and interesting."

Of course, the respect that ESA's management affords the personnel under

their charge also extends toward each other. When speaking with the "powers that be," it's apparent that Norris, Frenzel and office manager **Scott Phinney** have a deep-rooted respect for each other. In fact, it's duly noted that Frenzel and Norris have never engaged in an argument.

"Dale and Bill have disagreed on things," says Carolyn, "but they've always compromised with each other. I think that says a lot about them."

Frenzel attributes this to a number of factors. In the 15 or so years the two have been partners, Frenzel asserts that he and Norris have always approached their business as to what's morally and ethically right. Good communication and friendship are also key.

"Dale and I are probably as good of friends as we are partners," he says. "Keeping in mind our geography — with his living in Albany and myself in Syracuse — we communicate quite frequently. That's the secret to our success."

Another strong component to the success of ESA lies in their commitment to good old fashioned customer service and a concept they refer to as "relationship selling."

"Our goal has always been to provide excellent customer service — especially considering today's competitive marketplace," says Phinney, who joined the company in 1993. "This entails quick response time to our customer's questions — I think this is what they really appreciate the most."

Norris and Frenzel assert that they've tried to instill some basic fundamentals in their customer service and sales staff that simply boil down to common courtesy. When a customer calls in with a request or a question, Norris tells his staff to respond to those calls as quickly and efficiently as possible. Even if the employee doesn't have an answer right away, it's important for them to let the customer know that they're working on it.

"We need to be honest and keep our promises," says Norris, "because our word is all we are."

Along the same lines is the company's concept of relationship selling. According to Phinney it's really as simple as "partnering with wholesalers and having a good relationship with them."

Frenzel posits that not only is that true



Principals Dale Norris (left) and Bill Frenzel firmly believe in fostering good relationships with clients.

Photography by Laurin Trainer Photography

on a professional level, but on a personal one as well. Frenzel says that, personally, he never views a wholesaler as just simply a customer, but rather as a client.

"These folks are professional people who run their own businesses," he says. "If we afford them the respect on that level and let them know we view them as professionals, we can cut through a lot of the mustard."

Carolyn asserts that ESA is able to provide this "value-added service" to its customers because her husband and Frenzel truly are interested in what they can do for the distributor's business.

"Dale was in this industry even before

he became a rep," she says. "So, some of the customers that he's dealing with are in their third generation — we know the grandparents, the parents and now the grandchildren. It goes a long way beyond just doing business."

ESA even goes so far as to append to this ideology of fostering good solid relationships by opting to not have a distribution facility. According to Frenzel, the company has been asked to augment their firm with the addition of a warehouse in the past, but he and Norris decided a long time ago that having such a facility would not benefit them.

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