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Tailor made

Boutique-style guarding firms discuss personalized service and how they can outdo the big guys

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Bespoke service

Small and mid-sized guarding companies may have the advantage when it comes to agility and offering clients a personal touch

The term “boutique” probably conjures images of made to measure clothing, handmade luxury items or in the case of a hotel, a small, carefully appointed living space where every room might be different.

In terms of security, boutique might mean a small enterprise operated by a handful of people who may also be the owners and can deliver a personalized level of service.

It can also mean a tough existence where smaller firms have to compete not only with each other but with national and even international guard companies for business. *Canadian Security* sat down with representatives from six small and mid-sized firms to get their thoughts on how they’re different from the bigger guys on the block (and how they’re the same) and what it means today to compete successfully in the guarding world.

Canadian Security: What skill sets or competencies are you looking for in your guards?

Al Herrington: My basic approach is, and has been since the start of the company, I look for future law enforcement. Our resource pool are the young men and women that are graduating from a law, security or police foundations program. So we’re looking for people with good decision-making abilities, people who have great interpersonal communication skills. We deal with our clients directly every day, so those people need to be able

to articulate their thoughts and create a positive image to that client — and talk to them. So often, we hear about people who are not able to communicate effectively. I think, in this business now, that’s critical, to be able to speak effectively and listen and understand what’s happening. And then all the other skills that go along with that are secondary.

Benjamin Tabesh: There are three areas that we focus on, that we harness. The first is communication, utilizing empathy through interaction with residents, visitors and the environments and be able to provide the staff the resources to be able to do that and to be able to understand where the empathy is in the secure environment. The next is being tech savvy. Really, all the environments we’re working in do incorporate some understanding of how to work with various systems, various softwares, so understanding individuals and whether they have experience with them, as well as being able to harness that moving forward. Third, which is the most important but it seems to be the least recognized, is for them to be able to deal with various types of emergency and be prepared for that. And that’s where the training comes in.

Quintin Johnstone: I used to be a professor at Guelph-Humber in policing foundations. These are young people who are really interested in becoming police officers and, frankly, we find

PHOTOS: SANDRA STRANGEMORE



Al Herrington, president, Progarde Security



Benjamin Tabesh, CEO, Condor Security



Joe Maher, owner, Russell Security Services

them the best type of recruit for our purposes. We have to give them not only training but also mentorship, life mentorship, and I think that's what a lot of people miss — that quality of life piece. A lot of these kids are living at home with mum and dad; they don't have a career goal. One of the questions in our application process is, What is your five-year goal? What are you doing? Are you doing any volunteer work? Are you building a resumé for the future? Do you have any interchangeable skills?

BT: From the moment any individual enters our hiring process, one of the first qualities we look for is, what are their long-term goals? What we do is, we're building on a training program, facilitating their skill sets. We want to help them get to those goals. So just to go through our training programs: with every training program we have, not only are they given the skills to be able to excel in the work they do, they're transferable to any environment they're going to be able to do, whether it's in policing, whether it's being a first responder, whether it's being a property manager.

Matthew Williams: I think in this industry particularly you get three different types of candidates or employees. You get people who use it as a stepping stone into the emergency services. [Then there are] the people who are lost in what career they want to go into perhaps, and these people might go into a site super position, and some people stay in that position. I've got employees who have been at site for 20 years, and they're comfortable in that position. And then you have the people who've had a stressful career, and they just want a nice, relaxing nine to five job or 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. job. And they're just using it for the cash until they retire. But for, the ambitious ones, I'll always try and mentor people who are passionate, the ones who come forward and say, What opportunities are presented? You can only push forward the people who have that ambition. You can't throw it on people who don't have that drive.

Justin Ferns: We try to take that grassroots approach with our staff and, like a number of colleagues have said, we try to get to know all of our staff. But as you continue to grow from a small to a medium and a larger company, it's hard to know each person by name. I once prided myself on that.

CS: To what degree is technology playing a role, whether it's guard tour, or CCTV or advances in intrusion or access control?

JF: Technology is the tip of the iceberg, and we're only seeing a tiny bit of it right now. Five, 10 years ago, the big technology that really wowed clients was the guard tour systems. Ten years ago, you took the guard tour system to a client, and they said, "That is amazing." We're so far past that now. Talking to clients downtown, now there's a velocity software built into their CCTV cameras so when someone's running fast, it raises an alarm and the camera zooms in on that person. Probably, the majority of our clients don't even know that software exists. It's very expensive right now. I think five, 10 years down the road, you're going to see that being much more attainable. I don't think it's negatively going to affect us that focus on guarding. You'll maybe see a 10 or 20 per cent decrease, but with that, you'll see a better appearance and the staff will be more skilled using those technologies.

AH: I have the luxury of being involved with the Canadian Security Association, and each year they have Security Canada [Exhibitions] and the amount of technology there is just overwhelming to me, as to what things can do. And the latest and the greatest is the movement towards CCTV — and the analytics that are associated with that. I look at technology as phenomenal, and there's a place for technology. But I am still a firm believer that there is no better bang for your buck than the boots on the ground, and as great as the technology is, you're going to have to have the people able to use it.

We've talked to people who, particularly on our alarm side



Justin Ferns, vice-president, COO, Iron Horse Security and Investigations



Quintin Johnstone, founder and owner, Samsonshield



Matthew Williams, president and CEO, Pennine Security Solutions

of things, want me to put in a whole bunch of cameras. “That’s awesome.” Then they call me back: “We got broken into.” “Bet you got great pictures.” “Yes.” “Did it stop the break-in?” “No.” I say, “But you had some good technology there.” So, it’s looking at, how can you partner the technology? And often, you have to ask the client, “What is your expectation? What do you expect the technology to do?”

Joe Maher: The technology we use is customer-based. I don’t supply it. That’s not what I do. Our core business is guarding. I see the reports; I see how they work. The environment of the technology operator sometimes is not the warmest. It can be in a room with no windows; you’re down there for eight hours or a 12-hour shift. And it’s hard to get that person that wants to do that role. I have one that continually turns over; I just can’t find that one good person that wants to work that swing shift down in this area. I have good ones. The young ones do a good job, but the young ones leave.

QJ: There’s nothing like a live person to not only react to crimes in progress and people who have medical emergencies, which is our primary concern, particularly with condos. However, I think remote viewing is going to impact our industry. Where we have two guards at two different stations, a lot of our properties are looking towards moving that secondary position — it’s not as high volume — to remote viewing and having a single guard. I think the future of remote viewing is going to be there. I think it’s going to impact us that do live guards, unfortunately. I think it’s going to be a hybrid approach that’s going to be good for the communities, though, to be fair.

Some companies are still doing hard copy reports ... and you can’t really utilize them. You can’t provide with a hard copy report any analytics. We’re developing a dashboard system, which is about a year out right now, that’s going to be accessible for any board member and say how many parking complaints we’ve had in the last six months or fire alarms, etc. So that’s something that we’re working on that we think is the future.

MW: So it all comes down to cost and return on investment, especially in the residential. How much is the client willing to spend? They can have all the bells and whistles they want, but as everyone here is saying, technology can’t replace a person, and a person can’t replace technology. But they both have to work together, and if you get the right tools and the right training for the individuals, it’s a great formula. There are numerous products coming into the residential field, such as the virtual concierge, which is off-site monitoring for a building. It won’t work for a lot of buildings where they like that interpersonal connection with the person behind the desk, but for the buildings where they don’t have the budget to facilitate a person behind a desk for eight hours, 16 hours or 24 hours a day, it’s a solution. It’s better than nothing.



According to roundtable participants, technology can play an essential role in security, but skilled, trained individuals will always be the vital component.

BT: I agree with what everyone is saying. Our core is the security guard business, and I don’t think we will ever sway from that core. But what we have done is embrace technology with every aspect of our operation. What the technology has done for us is it’s made the staff more valuable, a lot more resourceful. The ability to be able to manage the information and the tasks, all the way from the basic security guard working at a construction site [and] we know where the patrols are being conducted at any point in time; for transparency of the client, when the client needs information, and needs to be able to present it to their clients, that they’re going to have access to that information; something that, Quintin, you alluded to, as far as analytics goes, we do analytics for our clients on a regular basis when we go to board meetings or do management meetings with them. Technology is ultimately making our life easier to present ourselves in front of our clients.

AH: I think Benjamin is key in regards to the analytics, and that is we’re all aware of the hand-written reports. You give it to them: this fire exit was blocked, and you come back and it still happens. There’s nobody reading these reports. And then at the end of the year, you sit down and someone says, Your contract is up for renewal and we just don’t see you guys doing anything for us. And you say, really? And you throw down the stack, and you say, “We have done a little analysis of our software, and you had 6,472 fire code violations that we caught for you. If those had not been dealt with, that would have been \$1.7 million in fines. How do you like them apples?” But I think the technology, particularly the report management software, helps people see the value of those boots on the ground so that you can show them there’s a value to what we’re doing. Here’s the analytics, and here’s the data to back it up.

QJ: You can’t carry a stack of hard copy reports into these meetings with, generally speaking, and particularly in Toronto,

young people around the board that are all tech savvy. You'll look like a dinosaur. It doesn't work. These folks that are on boards, they need that information in real time. They had someone ask them a question in the hallway, and then they're on to you at 11 o'clock at night: how many fire alarms did we have last year? And you have to be able to send them that; it has to be in real time. They don't want to wait, and nor should they have to wait with this technology that we have available. And it makes us more professional, when we're able to answer those questions in real time.

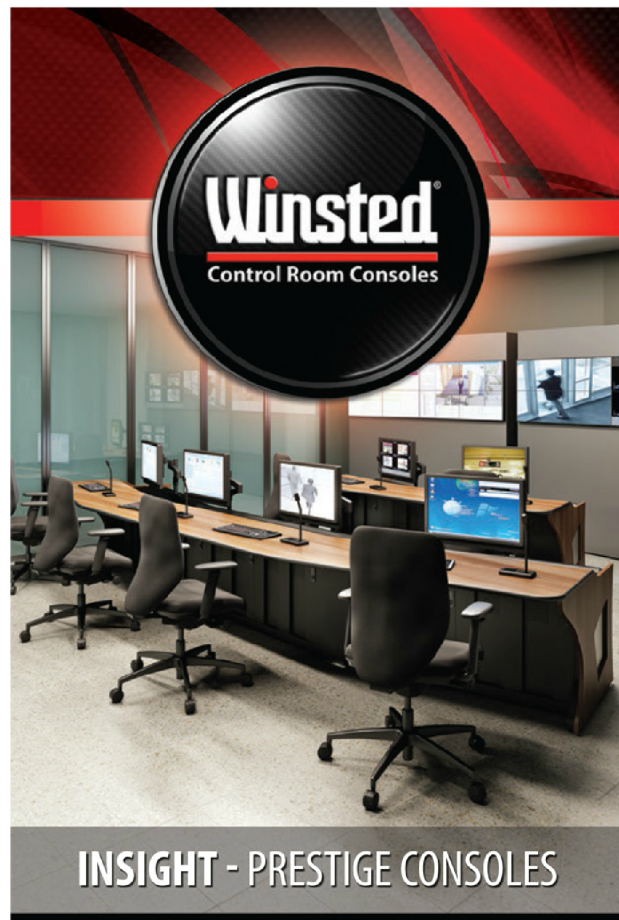
JF: What it boils down to, with client expectations, today is: they don't want to be bothered. Probably 89 per cent of our clients, especially in residential property management, which we seem to getting a lot of, the property managers, the boards, the residents themselves, they just want fewer headaches. They want to see how we're doing that. If you're forward thinking and transparent and keep the lines of communication constantly open, that's what makes or breaks you.

JM: I believe in what he says: a lot of them don't have time for us anymore. But the younger ones, they want more weekly meetings, KPI reports, risk assessments, customer service. It's the trainer, too. They'll actually attend that training session, sit in the room and see that the training we're giving is at 100 or 110 per cent. The younger ones, that's what they want to see. The older, some customers [say], "You look after security, send us our invoice and make sure everything works right." I like those ones, as long as they pay in a timely fashion.

MW: Every time I go in to speak to potential clients, I'll ask them, what are your main concerns, what can I do to improve it? The No. 1 is, we want less turnover; we want better training. And it's the same every time: I will say to them, I can give them more training. But to have the best retention, you need to understand that we have to pay the staff more. So if we're paying the staff minimum rates of pay, \$12 an hour, and the clients next door in the same community are paying slightly more, the employees we bring to your site are going to go to who's paying them the most money.

And that is the same answer everywhere I go. Unless they're getting rewards from the client in other ways, it all comes down to retention. And that starts with the client appreciating that and paying more for the employees.

We are transparent. If you want us to pay the staff \$13 an hour, we will pay them \$13 an hour, and this is the bill rate. We're not going to bill you X amount and pay them \$11. We will tell you. That's from my personal experience — and real time communication. Take ownership. Things are always going to happen in security. If you start trying to brush them under the carpet and say, "We're not responsible; it never happened," it's just going to come back and bite you at a later date. Take ownership; be the first one to take it to the client and say, "Sorry, this has happened. To prevent this happening



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in the future, we're going to have a staff meeting; we're going to address this. We're going to refresh everyone with the correct procedures to do this."

QJ: You hit the nail on the head. We're all subject to competition, which is great. But where are we in Ontario where we are driving the price down so far that we are forced to pay our guards not a lot of money. I don't have partners. It's just me. I am the owner of the company, so I can afford to take less of a margin and pay more. But there are jurisdictions in Europe, in New York State, etc., they are paying their people significantly more. We have to, as an industry, help our folks make more money. And that is not to dissuade people from competition, which is great, but we have to, as an industry, show our clients and show the province that we are worth a lot more than what we are able to pay our guards at our current bill rates.

That's the balancing act you talk about. They want to get a Rolls Royce for the price of a VW. But the old adage, it's the good, fast, cheap triangle. You can't have all three exist in our space. If you want it good and fast and cheap, it doesn't happen. So, you have to educate the public. That's something we have to do as a smaller organization group because we can't compete with the big multinationals. They will take on a site at cost just to take it.

AH: Our tag line has always been, We'll provide you with exceptional level of service at what we consider a fair and reasonable price. And we tell everybody you can get it cheaper. "I can?" "Absolutely, you can get it cheaper. Here's the list of people you can call if you want it cheaper. Here are their names and phone numbers. If you want cheaper, go ahead." I say, "That's not the market we're in."

BT: Our motto is we can take a \$12, \$13 guard, and they're going to perform as a \$15, \$16 guard. Why is that? The motivation is not necessarily always what you're paying the staff. It's what we spoke about earlier: it's the training, the focus on support, the focus on building yourself for future advancement. And I think this is what this industry needs to put a little more attention on, more than the fact that everyone is working on the same old school mentality: if you pay more, you're going to get more. No, break it down for the clients. Clients are going to be able to understand and see the value they're getting for what they are putting into it.

CS: What are the advantages of a smaller guarding company in this market?

JM: It starts with me. I'm at the monthly meetings, I'm present for all these things. I think that's what the small company does.

"I'm at the meetings, I'm present for all of these things. I think that's what the small company does."

— Joe Maher,
Russell Security Services

And I don't want to be the largest. I have a goal. I have been the largest, and I've taken a step back. I have a goal that I want to achieve. One of the other things a small company brings is — someone said you know all your employees by name. When I took over another account, I said, "Bill, how is everything today?" And he said "Sir, no one has ever called me by that name before. I've never even seen the owner of the company previously." I think the small organizations bring that family orientation to the industry. It's working for me. I have a goal, and I won't go any larger. I know what the number is, and once you start at that number, you fail.

AH: I think there's a myriad of benefits, but one of the biggest things is that personal interaction and the ultimate responsibility. For example, clients know me, and they know that, ultimately, the buck stops with me. And, over the last 25 years, it's been consistently me.

JF: The smaller to mid-level companies, as long as they can deliver on their promises — I think ultimately, clients are always going to get better service. Obviously, there are people who would combat that, from larger organizations. But I think, at the end of the day, when our company literally lives and breathes on those clients, that's what matters.

QJ: I think we've all seen companies that grow really quickly, too fast, cut back on good quality people. That was one of the things that I recognized, starting my business, I never wanted to do. When organizations get too big, they flat line, and they have a multitude of areas. And you get into that "it's not my job" mentality. And that's where I never want to go as an organization. With small organizations, you get the luxury of being able to specialize a lot better than the big companies. That's exactly where Samsonshield wants to maintain our space.

BT: It comes down to the focus on the management. Companies that are our sizes, you have more grasp on the activities on a regular basis. One of the things we do as part of our guidelines is that we have monthly feedback with meetings, as well as emails. There's a lot more initiative; there's a lot more focus on teambuilding, having a stronger team and making sure that team is always facilitated. I think there are some national players that do have that and they do a great job at that. I don't want to take away from what they do. But I think the advantage of having a more boutique style is that the client is going to get a more personal touch; they're going to get more available managers; they're going to get more available supervisors; they're going to have the ability, for example, if they call me, I'm going to answer the phone. They don't need to go through three channels of communication to get a decision. 