

## ***2009 Louisiana Small Business Person of the Year***

**Robert A. Baker, President**  
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Baker Sales, Inc. (BSI) is a closely held Louisiana corporation that was formed nearly 30 years ago for the sole purpose of wholesale distribution of steel pipe, fence pipe and fence supplies to oil-related businesses in southeast Louisiana. Today, as a result of Mr. Baker's tenacity and willingness to adapt to market changes, Baker Sales now services a 250 mile radius in which his customer base has expanded beyond the oilfield industry to include providing products to contractors and plumbers, as well as fence supply companies and fence contractors.

Robert Baker began Baker Sales in 1978 in a small portable building with a small amount of capital, and three employees. In the early years of BSI, obtaining credit from local banks was virtually impossible. In one particular instance, Baker received word from his supplier that he had received an over-shipment of a particular pipe; and therefore, his supplier was able to provide Baker with a substantial discount on that piping. Says Baker, "In order to gear-up the business for sales, I had to broker a deal with one of my supplier's competitors, which in turn, allowed me to open an account with Net 30 day terms". "It was not easy, but thankfully, I had the gift of gab and was able to convince my supplier to have confidence in my basic business sense." That one sale to the Port of New Orleans allowed BSI to move the pipe and capture a sizable profit. It also provided him with a market niche and reputation to deliver a quality product with relatively low cost.

Because of the type of industry that BSI services, throughout its 30 year history, BSI has to consistently revamp to meet demand and retain market share. During the late to mid 1980s, the oil industry in southeast Louisiana essentially dissipated and migrated to Houston, leaving southeast Louisiana with severe unemployment and business failures. In BSI's case, it also caused Mr. Baker to have heartburn, suffer with sleepless nights and endure many hours of litigation because the bank was attempting to recall his loan. Through creative business strategies after consultation with SBA resource partners such as SCORE and the Hammond SBDC, BSI was able to stay the course and keep the bank from padlocking his business. Through the consultation sessions with SCORE and SBDC personnel, BSI was able to position itself to obtain a \$550,000 SBA loan in 2000 and another for \$400,000 in 2002 for working capital and operation costs. Baker states, "these resources provided invaluable knowledge that allowed me to provide greater customer service and retain my business dignity". "I also have to thank my customers and even more so, my suppliers, for having faith in me during these turbulent times. Because of their support, BSI is a better company today".

Little did Baker know that again in 2005, his tenacity to overcome adversity would be put to the ultimate test with the onset and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While BSI did not sustain any physical damage as a result of Hurricane Katrina, some economic loss was felt due to the cessation of business transactions and some business closures. Also, four of BSI's employees did suffer total destruction or had severe damage to their personal residence as a result of Katrina. Because of the dedication and quality customer service that his employees had provided to the company during turbulent times, Mr. Baker felt that it was his turn to do the same. Therefore, while evacuated from his primary residence, Mr. Baker went to a local bank and made arrangements to have one month's salary direct-deposited into each of his employee's account to allow them the ability to recover and maintain a sense of dignity and peace during recovery phase following the hurricane's destruction. As a result of this one small gesture, Mr. Baker did not lose one single employee.

An active civic and community leader, Robert Baker has been a member of the Rotary International for over 23 years. He has helped organize and implement the Slidell Cleanest City Advisory Board in 2005; helped write a \$1500 letter abatement grant to educate elementary school children about making Slidell a cleaner and more beautiful city; and, Mr. Baker was instrumental in planting 338 trees during the "Planting Trees for Tomorrow" campaign; wrote a \$10,00 Louisiana Urban Forestry grant, which was instrumental in Slidell receiving the designation of "Tree City USA". Baker is also a member of the Lacombe and Slidell Chambers of Commerce; past member of the New Orleans World Trade Center; member and past president of the Korea Louisiana Business Association; member of the Men of Manresa, a Catholic retreat house for men; member of the American Fence Industry Association and member of the National Association of Steel Pipe Distributors.

From a modest beginning in a small portable building with three employees, Baker Sales has just celebrated its 30 year anniversary (December, 2008), and is now located on approximately 7 acres of prime property in Slidell with ten full-time employees. To simply state that Mr. Baker has served his business and residential community is an understatement. Through Baker's commitment to customer service, quality product delivery, and resolve for unwavering business principles, BSI has prospered through many hardships throughout its 30 year history, and Robert Baker is fully committed to ensure that BSI's basic philosophy remains unchanged.