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## Elevator design firm thinks outside of the box

Creativity powers rapid ascent of Alameda's Unique Elevator Interiors

Sacramento Business Journal - by [Ilana Fried](#) San Francisco Business Times

Design rises to new heights at Unique Elevator Interiors, a young Alameda company with an eye for the unusual.

Elevators have evolved from functional boxes to glass-and-marble symbols of a building's prestige and purpose. Modern developers know when prospective tenants view a building, they typically scope out the lobbies and elevators.

The company's imaginative approach (UEI created a battleship-style elevator for Old Navy) has brought lucrative jobs in San Francisco at Barney's, 650 California St., and the Ferry Building. With a burst in sales in 2007, UEI outgrew its Oakland office. The company moved this year, accepting help from Alameda's industrial development bond. With low interest rates and a 30-year commercial loan, UEI now stands across from a Peet's Coffee facility in a new waterfront development.

Co-founder and chief executive officer Tom Irion is careful to keep designs fresh, but smooth and streamlined.

"No casino look," joked Irion, referring to some Vegas hotels' gaudy designs. "A lot of glass and marble."

Unlike large elevator companies that offer only standard interiors, UEI caters to clients desiring individual designs. Very few people are qualified to do the full range of work, which requires versatility in handling metal, glass, wood and other materials. The production teams that design the products, come from other industries. Irion, for example, was originally an architect.

### Pushing the right buttons

Referrals, Irion said, make all the difference. He and co-founder Tim Crawford wanted to make right the years of unfulfilled promises they saw in the elevator industry before starting UEI in 2001. Providing mock-ups with different finishes in their shops, they allow customers to identify exactly what they want. Further, by following green initiatives and paying employees above the industry average, UEI hopes to create high-quality services.

This attention to customers' needs has paid off. No longer is the company assigned small projects. Their high-stakes deals, including relationships with all four major elevator companies -- Otis,

KONE, ThyssenKrupp, and Schindler -- support company growth.

"They are the leading experts in elevator cabs renovation in this market," said Theresa Krueger, property manager at **CAC Real Estate Group**. "Their business is based on their reputation -- that they always follow up and follow through. If there is an issue that comes up, they always deal with it directly," she said. Krueger worked with UEI on two California Street projects.

### Going down

The dearth of competition is partially due to legalities. When the state of California passed the Certified Quality Conveyance Company initiative in 2003, many firms didn't pass the test. Basic malfunctions -- the kinds that frustrated Crawford and Irion for years -- no longer slipped under the radar. With accountability came a drop in viable businesses. UEI came out in the lead.

Between 2002 and 2006, UEI brought on board their main designers and engineers. But hiring is a labor in itself. "We have to teach people," said Irion. "Nobody comes to us trained," though UEI now boasts four field crews.

In total, UEI found its way as the only major player in the Bay Area. It's a position that has led to intensely loyal clients from Eureka to Bakersfield. But the company's home base for business and growth remains in the Bay Area.

As the company moves into its new space, and secures a broader, bulkier client base, it strives to maintain its simple business maxim. "We do what we say we're going to do," Crawford said.

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