



# Pennsylvania Contractor Aims to Revolutionize the HVACR Industry

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THE NEWS STAFF

Inside the offices of Conshohocken, Pennsylvania-based Unique Indoor Comfort Heating and

Cooling hangs a sign that reads: Work hard and Be NICE.

That five-word phrase succinctly sums up the fun-loving culture of the HVACR contracting company it hangs within.

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## Unique Indoor Comfort Heating and Cooling

**OWNER:** Nate Kukla  
**LOCATION:** Conshohocken, Pennsylvania  
**YEARS IN BUSINESS:** Seven  
**BULK OF MARKET:** Residential service and replacement  
**TOTAL SALES FOR 2016:** \$8.6 million-plus  
**TOTAL EMPLOYEES:** 46  
**TOTAL SERVICE TECHNICIANS AND INSTALLERS:** 28  
**AVERAGE HOURS EMPLOYEES SPEND IN TRAINING:** 85 hours per year  
**BENEFITS BEYOND MEDICAL/DENTAL INSURANCE:** 401(k) with company match; paid vacations; holiday pay; company vehicles; tool allowance; uniforms; employee gym; profit-sharing year-end bonus; company-paid technical, communications, and leadership training; incentive trips; and team activities, including paint ball, ifly, dinners, sporting events, contests, spa days, summer family picnics, and a year-end party.  
**INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION & CONTRACTOR GROUP MEMBERS:** ACCA, Pennsylvania Air Conditioning Contractors of America (PACCA), North American Technician Excellence (NATE), International Ground Source Heat Pump Association (IGSHPA), Refrigeration Service Engineers Society (RSES), and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design – Green Associate (LEED AP).  
**THE NEWS SELECTED THIS CONTRACTOR BECAUSE:** Unique Indoor Comfort's devotion to customer service; its kind, caring culture; and its immaculate ratings on Yelp, ReviewBuzz, and Google helped earn the company *The NEWS*' 2017 Best Contractor to Work For honor in the East region.



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"We're a customer service company that happens to excel at heating and air conditioning," said Nate Kukla, company president. "It's a business, so you have to make sure you take care of the business side of things, but we have as much fun as we can. We're aiming to revolutionize the industry by offering 'wow' experiences at every interaction."

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### THE REVOLUTION HAS BEGUN

While Unique Indoor Comfort's Philadelphia branch opened in 2011, the company's roots run much deeper.

Tom Mutz created the business in 1966 after he and associates purchased Iron Fireman Heating and Cooling of Milwaukee. In 1967, Tom Mutz and Unique Indoor Comfort introduced the high-velocity system and later founded Unico, which manufactures high-velocity systems. Tom Mutz later launched branch divisions in Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, and Indianapolis.

In 2005, Kukla, who was working in sales for Johnson & Johnson, received a call from his



**ONE OF A KIND:** Unique Indoor Comfort's Philadelphia branch was started in 2011 by company president, Nate Kukla; general manager, Graham Lucard; and salesman, Paul Bistline.

uncle, Frank Mutz, who owns and operates Moncrief Heating and Air in Atlanta. Frank Mutz, son of Tom Mutz, recruited Kukla for a manager position. Kukla accepted and served in that role for five years before leaving to facilitate Unique Indoor Comfort's Philadelphia branch.

Kukla and two others, general manager, Graham Lucard, and salesman, Paul Bistline, started the company in 2011.

Today, Unique Indoor Comfort of Philadelphia specializes in residential heating and air and offers replacement and installation services related to steam, hot water, oil, ductless, high-velocity, geothermal, and conventional forced-air HVAC systems.

"We knew there were lots of HVAC companies out there," Kukla said. "So, when we started the company, we decided we were going to differentiate ourselves through our outstanding customer service. Our leadership team began looking at companies that have excellent customer service, such as Zappos, L.L. Bean, Ritz Carlton, Disney, etc., and pinpointed exactly what made their customer service so great. We devised a plan of our own and wholeheartedly dedicated ourselves to outstanding customer service. Our customers are always our top priority. We take a great deal of pride in our ability to solve their problems."

In seven short years, the

company has grown from three entrepreneurs to 46 employees and boasted revenues in excess of \$8.6 million in 2017.

### TRUST THE PROCESS

While Kukla has a decade-plus of sales experience, he entered the HVACR industry with no field experience. This vantage point has led him to be more proactive when hiring employees from outside the industry.

“I feel it’s healthy to bring people in from all walks of life, and I refuse to pigeonhole ourselves strictly to those who have industry experience,” he said. “You can’t read the label from inside the jar, so to speak.”

While Kukla is willing to groom the right applicants, he insists the company doesn’t cut corners when it comes to hiring.

“We recognize our people are our differentiator; therefore, we’re aiming to create the Navy Seals of heating and air conditioning,” he said. “We only hire individuals with exceptional character and work ethic. Some of our best people are home-grown, for lack of a better word. They come to us with minimal experience and come up through our training programs. That’s the linchpin of how we’ve been so successful.”

One such employee is Deborah Zahal.

Zahal started with the company in a temporary position as a bookkeeper, filling a vacancy created when the current bookkeeper left on maternity leave. Zahal, who had no HVACR industry experience, immediately clicked with Unique’s leadership team.

“I’ve never been involved with a company culture quite like this,” she said. “Our top priority is the customer, and right underneath that is our employees. It’s an amazing place to work.”

Once the bookkeeper returned to her job, Zahal was hired as a full-time employee, which served as recognition of her talent and value to the team.

“I truly believe, in my heart of hearts, that we have the best HVACR contracting culture in the industry,” she said. “We work as a team. It’s a fun atmosphere that’s relaxed with no yelling, shouting, or blame. We believe in each other and work hard to accomplish our goals.”

Another example is lead installer, Brandon Fry, who joined the company five years ago. “After meeting Nate and



**READY, SET, GO:** Installers Ricky Green (left), Alex Acevedo (center), and Taz Stewart (right) prepare the truck for their next project.



**CALLING THE PLAYS:** Unique Indoor Comfort’s work-hard, play-hard culture is led by (from left to right) Amanda Kukla, service manager; Graham Lucard, general manager; Mike Matta, service technician manager; Ron Hall, sales manager; Nate Kukla, president; and Brian Reeves, install supervisor.

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learning his personality, I knew I was in the right place,” Fry said. “He was truly interested in getting to know me and wanted to know about my interests and family. I was more than just an employee to him.”

Fry said Unique is more a family than a place of employment. “Everyone, from employees to management, really cares for one another,” he said. “That’s much different from any other place I’ve ever worked. I’ve been doing this for 17 years now, and I’ve never felt a desire to come into work every day like I do now. You’re leaving your family in the morning to go spend time with your work family. It’s incredible.”

To accommodate the company’s growth, and his personal growth, Fry will be promoted from lead installer to field supervisor this year.

“Our two greatest assets are our people and our culture, and we are conscious of developing both” states Kukla. “Once the right people are in place, Unique continually sharpens their skills with over 85 hours of annual soft skills and technical training. We

are working toward our ultimate goal of developing a full-time Unique University, where we are providing our people with all of the training necessary in house.”

Currently, Unique’s annual training curriculum includes 27 technical courses, 10 soft skill courses, and a management development program that teaches the up-and-coming leaders of the team how to develop their teammates.

“The soft skills courses are taught by an outside trainer who comes in twice a month to teach communication and people skills,” Kukla said. “We make sure to emphasize the basics, such as how to make solid eye contact, how and when to hand off a business card, why it’s important to look the part, the importance of a clean uniform — you can’t assume these traits are common knowledge. We aim to make these actions repeatable. That was the takeaway we discovered while studying the Disneys and Ritz Carltons of the world. We aim to offer the same experience regardless of which service

tech shows up at your door.”

The company cultivates its culture by holding meetings the first Monday of every month.

“We talk about our culture and what separates us from other companies, which is providing wow experiences,” Kukla said. “Members of the team are recognized at our monthly company meeting for exceptional behaviors with a wow award. It’s a lot of fun, and everyone gets into nominating each other. At the end of every year, we award our Captain Wow Award to the team member who has consistently exemplified our company’s standards. Captain Wow receives a bobblehead doll in his or her likeness and a warm-weathered vacation. It is quite an honor to be named Captain Wow.”

Employees, and their families,

are taken care of via company-sponsored medical and dental insurance. The company also offers a 401(k) plan with a company match, paid vacation, holiday pay, company vehicles, a tool allowance, uniforms, access to the company gym, a year-end profit-sharing bonus, incentive trips, an annual family picnic, and more.

“We’ve offered insurance from day one,” Kukla said. “It never occurred to us not to offer insurance. The people you work with are family. You want to be able to take care of them, and if you’re looking to employ the best employees, you have to offer the best care.”

## WORK HARD, PLAY HARD

One Monday morning, as employees filed into their

monthly staff meeting, they were greeted with mimosas and music.

The event, deemed “Customer Service Revolution Day,” required workers to ditch their work boots in favor of slippers. Employees were grouped into small teams and rotated throughout multiple team-building sessions, including a blindfolded obstacle course; inflatable jousting rinks; giant Jenga games; and classroom-style sessions where they learned about empathy, customer service, the importance of positive body language, and more.

“We wanted to wow the team with something fun and different,” Kukla said. “It was a day to remember and is something we’re going to continue to build upon.”

The Unique team also finds joy through interdepartmental competition.

“Service techs compete against one another for tickets to Eagles games, service managers do a good job of putting together contests that award points for certain accomplishments, and there’s always a number of competitions available for those of us in the office,” Kukla said. “We also compete when it comes to maintenance plan calls and sign-ups and a number of other things. If we achieve our team goals, we offer a companywide reward. While we’re always striving to work hard, we certainly aim to have fun doing it.”

The company also devotes time to several charities, including Cradles to Crayons, Philabundance, Paws for a Cause, and others.

“Different team members have brought forward their different charities, and we’re dedicated to being a part of as many as we can,” Kukla said. “For example, through Cradles to Crayons, we recently collected clothes for underprivileged children and donated our time as well. It’s something we do together, and with anything we do together, we have fun.”

## FORECASTING THE FUTURE

When Kukla started the company, he had no specific goals other than to provide exceptional service on a customer-by-customer basis.

“We didn’t set out to hit any particular size or number,” Kukla said. “We simply concentrated on bringing in good people because we recognized that good people are driven and always want more. Our growth has provided us with the oppor-



**WORDS OF WISDOM:** The offices of Unique Indoor Comfort feature a sign that reads: Work hard and Be NICE – advice that management and staff follow wholeheartedly.



**NODDING WITH APPROVAL:** At the end of every year, Unique awards its Captain Wow Award to the team member who has consistently exemplified the company’s standards. Captain Wow receives a bobblehead doll in his or her likeness and a warm-weathered vacation.

tunity to help more homeowners and team members, which is what makes all this worthwhile.”

Kukla isn’t concerned with growing too large — as long as the company continues to offer top-shelf customer service.

“We’ve experienced exceptional growth in seven short years,” Kukla said. “When we started, I knew every customer was receiving a wow experience because I knew every customer. Today, I know how talented our team is, therefore, I know our

customers are receiving, and will continue to receive, that wow experience.

“We’re helping individuals get through the anxiety related to fixing or replacing their heating and air conditioning issues on a daily basis,” Kukla continued. “Our customers know they’re not being taken advantage of. Knowing that we’re the company that people can trust is a big win to me and our team. And, everyone loves to be part of a winning team.”

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