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# Solar Direct, Leading the industry...

by Suzi Harkola



Solar Direct, founded in 1986 by Kirk Maust and Dale Gulden, was a pioneering company in the solar energy industry. Maust was quite the pioneer himself, having earned one of the nation's first degrees in solar and renewable technology. He graduated in 1981 from Pennsylvania State University's Mechanical and Nuclear Engineering department. Gulden, a strong marketer, brought sales experience in the solar industry to the partnership.

It was at Penn State that Maust was introduced to the concept of a solar engineering career. "It was a fluke," he admits with a smile. "During orientation for my business degree, the college announced a new solar energy degree program. I thought, 'hmmm, that sounds cool,' so I jumped right in. My

background of working with my dad wiring houses and building all things mechanical was a great influence; I have a natural mechanical knack for system designs, and Florida was a

natural destination to test my skill – not to mention a great escape from the cold Pennsylvania winters. Over the years I have grown to love the impact my career and business has on people and the planet; it feels good to give back and make a difference."

As their new company moved into a broader energy market, Maust engineered inventive solutions for ap-

plications in the emerging geothermal, indoor air quality and energy management fields, constructing and launching the company's first website and then an electronic shopping cart – one of the first e-commerce initiatives in the fledgling days of the Internet. Now the Company's Chief Executive Officer and Senior Engineer, Maust holds a Florida State Certified Solar License, and is a current member and former vice president of the Gulf Coast Chapter of the Florida Solar Energy Industry Association. He is North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) Certified for both Solar Thermal and Solar Photovoltaics (PV) – the first person in Florida to obtain both prestigious certifications and one of fewer than 40 in the State. Gulden is President of the



Company and Director of Marketing.

With a product line of over 300 eco-friendly products, Solar Direct's primary market is construction services throughout all of Florida. The company is currently

expanding with a national installer network and expansion into larger projects within the U.S., such as 100 Kilowatt to megawatt PV, commercial solar pool and solar water heating installations. Maust notes, "Solar electric is very popular now due to its trendiness and 'glamour' appeal, but solar water heating is gaining ground due to its extremely good economic payback."

Along with the more global expansion, Solar Direct has also initiated a new focus on serving the Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte County markets. "This year, we really want to get back to our roots," Maust said.

Their e-commerce business remains strong, providing about 70 percent of the Company's total revenue. Marketing plans include outreach to consumers, homeowners, commercial and government projects, and online and contractor resellers. "Most of our consumer-directed products are DIY, so we handle the sale and shipment and the homeowner does the installation," said Maust. "Of course, the larger projects are handled by one of our licensed installers."

Some of the products carried by the Company include solar pool and spa heating (Vortex is their primary brand and best seller), solar water heating, solar electric PV, solar pool pumps, solar air conditioning, solar attic ventilation, geothermal and insulation.

The corporate office and 10,000 square foot warehouse is located at 6935 15th Street East, Suite 120, in Sarasota. Not surprisingly, the building features solar panels mounted on the roof; more than one half of the electrical power for the building is powered by solar. The Company is doubling the system in 2012 to be 100 percent solar-powered. Staff includes 35 professionals in administration, sales, engineering and operations, with an additional installation department of 20 throughout Florida. The Company continues to grow, having added 11 staff members during 2011 and plans for expansion in 2012.

"I'm proud of our retention rate," noted Maust. "More than 90 percent of the people we hire remain with the company for more than three years. We are proud to support the community by hiring local workers, and we've always been impressed with the quality of commitment, loyalty and expertise that our staff brings to the table. We continue to expand our workforce with local expertise."

Solar Direct has taken a holistic approach to producing alternative energy. "We believe that, first, you conserve," explained Maust, "then you produce the power. Consumer education in this area has always been top-of-mind. We are adding a Home Energy Rating System (HERS) specialist to our team and a Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) license in 2012 to offer one-stop whole house design services."

Maust mentioned two projects undertaken by the company that were particularly rewarding. Solar Direct was selected to supply solar power for the Community Coalition on Homelessness in Manatee County through block grant funding in 2010. "We designed a system that would reduce their electric bill and also give them power during hurricanes and power outages," Maust said. "One system provides over 30

percent of electricity for the homeless shelter and food kitchen. Their electric savings allows them to use more funds for the homeless."

The other project was the Hampton Inn and Suites at the Sarasota/Bradenton International Airport. "We were able to supplement the electrical system in the hotel, contributing to their success at being one of the first LEED-certified hotels in Sarasota or Manatee counties," he stated.

"We have provided over 110 million BTUs of energy in the last two years with a solar hot water heating system installed during construction, and added a 32 kW solar PV system in December of 2011."

"I love challenging projects like these," Maust added, "and Dale [Gulden] is happy to oblige! He'll be out talking to potential clients, come back to my office and say, 'I sold this to a customer today. Can you make it work?' Of course we can, and do, and that creative approach to problem solving has been an undercurrent in the growth and success of the business."

Maust acknowledged the role that federal and local rebates have played on expanding solar installations, but also notes that the Company's products have reached grid parity in many areas of the U.S. He explained, "Grid parity is the point when a renewable energy such as solar costs less than fossil fuels. For Floridians, it is now possible to 'go solar' and pay less than the utility company's rate for power. System investments are so



low that most average homeowners can afford it, as savings pay for the system within two to eight years. It is now actually possible to have a net zero electric bill. Amazing."

The company holds the following Florida State Licenses: Certified Solar Contractor, Certified Electrical Contractor, Certified Commercial Pool and Spa Contractor, and Engineering Certificate of Authority and Professional Engineer.

*For more information, please contact Solar Direct at 800-333-9276 or visit their website, [solarirect.com](http://solarirect.com).*