Right place, right time

The exclusive rights to a new technology launched TerraTherm into a world of contamination – and that’s right where John Bierschenk wanted to be.

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It all started with research. John Bierschenk, co-founder and president of Massachusetts-based TerraTherm (Hot Firm No. 14 for 2015), says that he and his co-worker at the time, Ralph Baker, were working at another company, ENSR Consulting, and were asked to research a new technology – in situ thermal desorption – as part of a potential acquisition.

“Shell Technology Ventures was developing the ISTD technology for clean-up of contaminated soils and sediments within the subsurface,” Bierschenk says.

However, ENSR was unable to move forward with the acquisition, so Baker and Bierschenk decided to move on their own with a commercialization plan, and ended up with the exclusive rights to the ISTD technology. They founded TerraTherm Inc., an 80-person firm, in 2000.

A CONVERSATION WITH BIERSCHENK.

The Zweig Letter: What exactly does ISTD mean?

John Bierschenk: ISTD was first born out of the enhanced oil recovery field, but Shell found that the temperatures capable of being reached through...
ISTD were enough to reach boiling points of all organic contaminants (even especially nasty and historically hard to treat contaminants like manufactured gas plant waste, pesticides, and PCBs). Once boiling points are met, the contaminants volatilize and can be recovered by traditional vapor extraction equipment.

TZL: How have you seen TerraTherm evolve since its founding?

JB: Based in north central Massachusetts, we began as a company of two, and are now a company of roughly 80 professionals working across the country. Additionally, we now have a world-wide reach, with subsidiaries in Japan, China, and Denmark. We have expanded our suite of technologies and services to the point where we are now the only thermal vendor in the remediation industry to offer all three of the most mainstream and widely accepted methods of thermal remediation:

- Thermal conductive heating, which is a heating approach used in both ISTD and in its above-ground cousin technology.
- In-pile thermal desorption.
- Steam enhanced extraction.

After TerraTherm’s recent acquisition of Current Environmental Solutions, the firm is now able to offer electrical resistance heating, Bierschenk says.

TZL: What are key strengths for an effective leader? What are your key strengths?

JB: It’s simple. Unbarred passion for the business, the people who work for you, and your client are key elements. My key strengths include building teams while empowering them to perform, and setting clear expectations and rewarding results. I believe in building trust by giving the leaders what they need in the way of tools and resources to set them up in the best possible way to succeed.

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TZL: How would you describe your leadership style?

JB: Lead by example and management by walking around and talking to people. I often ask employees about their jobs, listen to their feedback, and show empathy. Additionally, I ask high-performers to step up and accept new challenges.

TZL: To date, what’s been your greatest challenge?

JB: Overcoming organizational growth constraints.

TZL: What is your vision for the future of TerraTherm?

JB: To continue growing to fill the increasing demands of our technologies and services, worldwide. Our thermal technologies have proven able to restore grossly contaminated properties to near pristine condition. I also see TerraTherm continuing to research, develop, and evolve to reach new heights in the thermal industry through thought leadership.

TZL: You were recently acquired by Cascade Technical Services. How has that affected TerraTherm? Has your role changed at all?

JB: Being part of CTS has broadened our geographical reach and depth of resources greatly. We are now able to offer our clients more than just thermal remediation: We can provide turnkey high resolution site characterization, along with chemical oxidation, and bioremediation as integrated site solutions.

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TZL: Tell me about a recent project you are especially proud of and why.

JB: We recently completed the largest thermal project in the world treating more than 400,000 cubic yards of jet fuel contamination to a depth of 275 feet below ground surface and removed and treated more than two million pounds of mass.

TZL: How have you helped your firm to outperform some competitors? What do you feel sets you apart?

JB: Our quality, attention to engineering details, and ability to provide an unbiased evaluation and selection of the optimal thermal solution for a given site’s conditions are what set us apart from our competitors. TerraTherm’s ISTD technology is proprietary through our license with the University of Texas. Additionally, TerraTherm is the only thermal remediation company to gain certification of our heating system through Electrical Testing Labs Mark, a symbol the product is compliant with applicable safety standards.

TZL: Are you married? Do you have children? Pets?

JB: I’ve been married for 33 years to my wife and best friend. I have two amazing and talented children and two hound dogs.

TZL: What’s one thing most people at the firm don’t know about you?

JB: I recently attempted a climb up Mount Blanc which has an elevation 15,400 feet.

TZL: What’s been your best vacation spot?

JB: We recently went scuba diving in Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. That was terrific.

TZL: What’s the last book you read?

JB: Cannery Row by John Steinbeck.

TZL: What’s the last movie you saw in the theater?

JB: Everest.

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