

Feeling at home with Canadian Residential Inspection Services

October 26, 2016

Canadian Business Franchise magazine

Copyright 2016 © Kenilworth Media Inc. All Right Reserved

By Mike Mueller

Home inspections are a bustling business these days, but to be successful, you need to stand out from the crowd on the strength of your brand and your name. As a franchisee for Canadian Residential Inspection Services (CRIS) in Vernon, B.C., I've benefited both from the knowledge of an established franchisor behind me and from my own experience in the construction and sale of houses.

Early lessons learned

I was born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alta., and lived there until I was 41. As the youngest of four siblings growing up in farm country, like many other country boys, I dreamed of becoming a cowboy or a fireman one day. At school, my favourite subject was math.

At the age of eight, I started to play guitar. My school didn't offer guitar lessons or, for that matter, anything else contemporary in its music classes, so I gathered all of my instruction from outside of school. I was drawn to both rock n' roll and country music and started to think my career path would involve music.

My first real job was actually with a franchise—McDonald's—but before too long, I moved on to teaching at my brother's music store and began to play in a band. I quickly realized I could make more money in one night playing a gig than I could in a month at the restaurant. I later became a co-owner of the music store and worked there for 20 years.

During that time, I met my wife Nadine, who was also from Medicine Hat, where she worked in a sports store. I owned a small house when we met and as our relationship progressed and we prepared for a growing family, we realized we needed a bigger home.

Nadine's was a family of construction workers and their knowledge was an amazing asset to us while constructing our new home. We both soon realized the potential in a good real estate market and ended up building and 'flipping' houses every few years.



I've played guitar since I was eight years old and I used to run a music store with my brother.

Choosing a new path

Things were going well, but I had always dreamed of moving to British Columbia. After a vacation there, I couldn't stop thinking about its lakes and scenery. I was working in Alberta's oil patch as a field operator at the time, which paid great, but wasn't very rewarding otherwise.

Our kids were still in grade school when we decided to make our move in August 2010, leaving the mosquitoes and high winds of Medicine Hat behind and heading to B.C.'s warmer climate. We bought an empty lot in the Okanagan Valley and rented while building our new home.

I had several ideas of what I might do for a living after we moved. I thought about teaching music or working in a music store again, but then I noticed the real estate market was much busier in the Okanagan than it was in Alberta at the time, so I considered becoming a realtor. Then I realized becoming a home inspector would be a much better fit given our background in construction. Another factor, given my young family, was the long hours real estate agents have to put in. I appreciated that inspecting houses, by comparison, could be a 9-to-5 job. I had really gotten the notion after accompanying a home inspector through a house we'd built.

It was shortly after the Great Recession and there was still a slump, but I felt a slow economy was actually a good time to get into this industry, since there's nowhere to go from there but up. It gave me the chance to establish myself as I became busier.

Becoming a home inspector

Before we moved to Vernon, I saw an ad in a magazine for CRIS. I gave them a call and we chatted. I had a slew of questions for them, as did they for me.

After comparing the franchise system to other similar opportunities, I contacted a few CRIS franchisees across Canada by phone and e-mail to hear their thoughts. They all agreed it was a good, supportive company. In particular, they liked its reporting system, which wasn't electronic yet like it is now, but was already top-notch. This encouraged me to look further into the franchise system and I found I loved the business model. Further, the franchisees I spoke to unanimously expressed joining CRIS had been an excellent decision.

So, after extensive research, I decided CRIS was the right opportunity for me. I bought my franchise in September 2010, choosing a territory spanning Vernon and the North Okanagan Valley, including Enderby, Armstrong, Lumby, Falkland and Shuswap Falls.

After almost four months of academic training, my actual field training took place in Edmonton during a week in the middle of winter. It was a chance to encounter a lot of situations we don't always see in B.C. I also learned a lot about older building methods and materials, since most of my previous experience was in new construction.

Along with my training by the franchisor, the B.C. government requires home inspectors to be (a) licensed by a not-for-profit organization called Consumer Protection BC and (b) members of a professional association that requires a certain threshold of training, so there will be very little risk for clients. There were a variety of such organizations and, for my part, I chose to join the Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors (CAHPI).

Getting the word out

My first unaccompanied home inspection took place in March 2011. It's hard to be a newbie in this field, since everyone wants to work with experienced inspectors. Fortunately, the franchisor

provided marketing advice, including manuals, and I was able to get the word out. Along with advertising, the CRIS corporate website made it easy for people to find me.

Our brand is wholly Canadian-owned and -operated, which is a great marketing feature, particularly for patriotic clients. They know we understand the nature of this market.

Making everyone happy

The CRIS training held me in good stead. The challenge in the beginning was not in performing routine inspections, but in knowing about lots of different types of homes and in communicating my findings to my clients so they would recognize the importance of certain aspects of my reports. Every situation is different and buyers can sometimes become very focused on the minor details of a house. You need to be able to communicate your findings in easy-to-understand terms. It's a great feeling when you genuinely help someone in making one of the most significant decisions of their life.

By way of example, I try to help them understand more about the various systems in a home, such as furnaces and water heaters. I can tell them the ages of those units right away.



My experience building houses helped prepare me to become a home inspector.

Another way we help is with our reporting system which, as mentioned, is now electronic. When I'm inspecting a house, I use an Apple iPad to compile my report. It allows me to just speak and the software spells everything out as text, which is a huge time saver. The report is then delivered by e-mail to the client before we even step outside the house. Compared to the old days of home inspections when reports were delivered the next morning or even sent through the mail, this is a great advancement.



It's one of the best reporting systems I've seen anywhere and my clients agree. I would have to say it is one of the best features of this franchise system, particularly in a hot real estate market with short closing dates, where time is of the essence. Our clients see so much value in the time we can save for them.

Balancing my schedule

I've been a home inspector for six years now and I renewed my franchise agreement last year, at the end of its initial five-year term. I also achieved my Registered Home Inspector (RHI) designation with CAHPI in 2013.

I very much enjoy the home inspection business. I'm a one-man show, but I have the franchisor's team behind me for whenever I need them. I'm part of a great industry that allows for a lot of flexibility. I don't even need to see the franchisor team in person very often. Everything's done by phone and/or e-mail and the communication is excellent.

The support is also fantastic, as this franchisor has nearly 30 years' experience in an industry that itself is only about 30 years old. They give me all of the tools I need to succeed.

I have learned a great deal over the past six years and am now in a place where the franchisor occasionally asks me to share my knowledge—particularly in a marketing capacity—with new franchisees to help ensure they, too, become successful. I feel this is one of the great aspects of this particular franchise system; there is a network of fellow CRIS inspectors who are accessible to those just starting up. I enjoy being part of that system to help them grow.

A typical day for me starts with two hours in the early morning in my home office, booking appointments and doing my bookkeeping. I fortunately have the business skills that allow me to do this myself and I only need to see my accountant at year end. The rest of the day, I'm in the field doing inspections, which usually takes about six to seven hours. Generally, I am doing two inspections a day, but when the season's especially busy, I sometimes squeeze in three or even four. I really appreciate how payment takes place during the transaction, so I don't have to waste time chasing my money.

The real estate market is certainly hot these days. Neighbouring CRIS franchisees and I can cover for each other when one of us is on vacation. We are also able to refer clients to each other if we are too busy to take on another inspection ourselves.

Even with the extra support, there are times—especially in the spring—when our schedules are packed full and we have to say 'no' to a potential client. I really don't like having to do that. It's tough.

Next steps

My wife also has a home-based business in the health and wellness field. Our kids, who are now 15 and 17, keep her busy running around when she's not working or overseeing the construction of our next house, but we often talk about teaming up to run my franchise in the future. If we did, we could be doing three to four inspections a day all year round.

I've also thought another way to grow my business would be to purchase another franchise territory. I could then hire home inspectors to work for me and I would take on more of a management role, where I'd have less field work and more time in my office, arranging appointments and taking care of my employees. I may start down that path by hiring an employee to work beneath me within my territory. We'll see what happens down the road, but the future does look bright.

Mike Mueller is a Canadian Residential Inspection Services (CRIS) franchisee in Vernon, B.C. For more information, visit www.canadianresidential.com/home-inspections-vernon.

CANADIAN RESIDENTIAL INSPECTION SERVICES (CRIS)

Established: 1988**Date of first franchise:** 2001

Franchise/corporate units: 30

Investment range: \$40,000 – \$45,000

Initial franchisee fee: \$24,500

Website: www.canadianresidential.com/franchise_information

E-mail: info@canadianresidential.com