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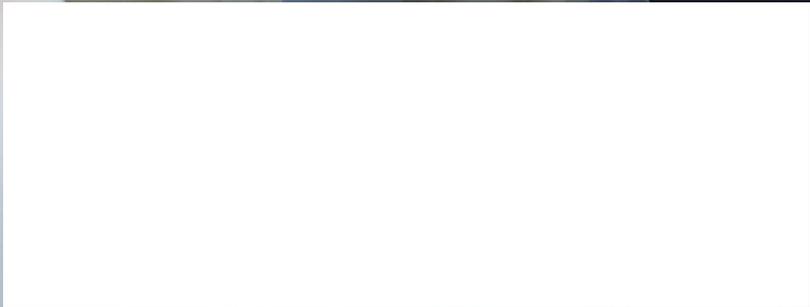
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From left: Immerse St. Louis partners Joel Suffian, Leigh Suffian and Brent Suffian in Brentwood, Missouri.



IMMERSE ST. LOUIS STICKS TO ITS GUNS

Showroom continues to thrive by providing superior service to its trades-only customers.

More times than not, when one sticks to its beliefs things end up working out. In the case of the Brentwood, Missouri-based Immerse showroom, a division of St. Louis-based Atlas Supply, sticking to its beliefs has been nothing short of spectacularly successful.

Immerse, founded less than eight years ago, is a trades-only showroom that caters to a vast swath of local designers, builders, bath and kitchen professionals, remodelers and plumbing contractors.

But opening a showroom wasn't always a topic of urgent discussion at parent company Atlas Supply, a one-location PHCP distributor in St. Louis that has been a fixture in the area since 1937. The Suffian family owns Atlas and Immerse and now is in its third generation of family ownership.

"We didn't want to compete with our customers," says **Leigh Suffian**, a partner in Immerse and Atlas with brother, **Joel Suffian**, and cousin, **Brent Suffian**. "That's why we didn't have any kind of showroom presence in recent history.

"But more and more people wanted to touch, see and feel product, so we wanted to find a way to kind of coexist with showing more of these products without competing against our customers, and that's why we went into the trades-only showroom business by opening this offsite sales center, if you

will. We started this when the economy was down. Vendors were looking for something like this and customers wanted us to show more of our products. That's how we were born."

Director of Sales **Tami Miller** has been with the showroom since the beginning, coming over from a national distributor. She played a key role in the design and strategy of the showroom. "The only reason I came here is it is trades-only," she says. "People said to me, 'Are you nuts?' I believed that it would work and it has. We went all-in with the concept and as a result we've built great loyalty with our customers."

And in less than a decade, Immerse, a member of the Luxury Products Group buying/marketing group, has built itself into one of the premier showrooms around, worthy of being named the 2019 *Supply House Times* Showroom of the Year.

Immerse joins Gerhard's Kitchen & Bath Stores by First Supply (2017) and ProSource (2018) as winners of the *Supply House Times* top showroom honor since the award's recent revival.

NOT BY ACCIDENT

Immerse is located in an industrial park complex in the St. Louis suburb of

Brentwood, but not too far from a number of higher-end retail areas. The selection of where the showroom is located is no coincidence, Suffian explains.

“We’re not on a main street where people would see us and that is very intentional,” she says. “We will help people if they wander in, but we stick to by-appointment-only as much as possible, so that when you do have your appointment you have our full attention. We are very loyal to the trade and it’s a very hard business model because it’s pretty limited, but you have to pick who you want to be and then work really hard to stick with it and earn those people’s loyalty. Sometimes you have to turn people away, which is a hard thing to do. It’s a unique business model for this day and age when everyone has access to everything, but there’s a good reason for it and it works for us. Yes, it’s really different from most of the way the world is working, but there seems to be a place for it.”

What is no accident is the world-class experience Immerse customers receive when they walk into the 4,500-square-foot showroom. For one, Immerse takes a bit of a different approach when it comes to the products it displays.

“We bring in different products you won’t find anywhere else,” Suffian says. “In many instances they are different from what other people are going to offer. We travel all over the country to be able to bring things in.”

Outside Sales Consultant **Jen Zilka** adds: “We have unique products — products that are different than anyone else in town. We are a residential selection center for all types of homes and people. We carry all types of products and styles, and we lead the market in service.”

Immerse staff has made it a priority to continually provide an aesthetically pleasing look to the space. “We work really hard to make all this look good,” Suffian says. “We make it feel calming and easy on the eyes, and that’s a hard thing to do with all the gazillions of products out there.”

Suffian and her staff are big believers in the interactive aspect of the customer. “Plumbing and plumbing-related products need to be experienced,” she says. “Our whole internet strategy so far has been one of client engagement. Here’s who we are, here is how we can work together and here’s what we want to do for you. Here’s a sample of our products and services and we hope we’ve ‘wowed’ you. Now come in to really get the experience.”

Sales Consultant **Anne Kelleher**, who also has been with the showroom since its inception, adds: “We’ve evolved a ton since we opened. We help the customer be as comfortable as possible when they are here and help them make sure they are well-educated so they can make the right plumbing product choices. We have deep relationships where people trust us. I need this, and we fill in the blanks for them.”

When Immerse first opened, it focused on being a destination spot for networking events that also happened to show off the showroom’s attributes. These days, that focus has shifted to more educational-based gatherings.

“We have one series called Design Cafes,” Suffian says. “Sometimes they offer CEUs and sometimes they don’t. We are extremely cognizant of people’s time. We’ve been doing more of these in the breakfast and lunch times lately, and they are attended by the bath and kitchen segment, by designers and sometimes by builders. We give them something to learn, sometimes manufacturer-specific.”

Suffian adds what has made these education gatherings successful has been the attendance numbers and the effort the Immerse staff has put into making sure the masses know about them. “It’s not like we send out an invitation and wait to see who is coming,” she says. “It’s follow-up calls and follow-up thank-you’s and surveys. We are very heavily involved in client interaction. We’re



From left: Immerse Sales Consultant Anne Kelleher, Showroom Consultant Peggy Tart and Showroom Consultant Jennie Persell. Kelleher is one of the showroom’s original members.

going out and finding business. We are real partners with our customers.”

Immerse also employs the use of a local marketing company (Arco and Associates) to help spread the company word, and also benefits from other partnerships, including its membership in LPG, the showroom vertical of IMARK Plumbing (formerly Omni Corporate Services), part of the IMARK Group.

“We work with a really great marketing company and we use another organization for hiring where we do all kinds of testing,” Suffian says. “Just like our partnership with LPG, I feel like we are surrounded by all kinds of professionals for all areas of the business and they all have helped us grow.”

LPG Director **Jeff MacDowell** counts himself as thoroughly impressed with Immerse’s approach. “Leigh and her showroom are special because she takes a stand on hiring the best people and then giving them the tools to be successful,” he says. “She has a unique business model and caters to the design community in her market better than anyone else.

“She also is focused on having productive and profitable lines in her showroom, and minimizes the commodity-type lines.”



Outside Sales Consultant Jen Zilka (left) with Director of Sales Tami Miller. “We say we have one of the best showrooms in the country,” says Miller, who also has been with the Immerse since the beginning.



From left: General Manager Paul Reigelsberger, Customer Support Specialist Mary Murphy-Overmann and Designer Lexi Sullivan. “We offer luxury service at whatever price point our customers are at,” Reigelsberger says.

IT REALLY IS THE PEOPLE

Suffian doesn’t hesitate for a millisecond to brag about the Immerse staff, which now numbers nine and has a mixture of veterans who have been with the showroom since the beginning, and relative newcomers who have come from different industries and also have made immediate impacts.

“The most important reason we are successful is our people,” she says. “Maybe everyone says this about their people? We work hard to find the best people. You can’t teach passion, and we have really passionate people who love what we do. We work hard as a management group and an ownership group to keep people fulfilled and share our vision and passion.”

Miller adds: “People buy from people. We have created a brand people want to buy from.”

Showroom Consultant **Peggy Tart** came to Immerse from the interior design industry less than a year ago. She refers to Immerse as “St Louis’ best-kept secret.”

“We are not on the beaten path, but when customers come into our showroom you see how awed they are because everything is functional and we have a great selection of good, better, best mix of products,” she says. “You will have a very cool experience when you visit us.”

General Manager **Paul Reigelsberger**, who came from the design and retail home furnishing industry, labels Immerse’s attention to detail with its customers as a key game-changer. “We work with multiple client styles,” he says. “We offer luxury service at whatever price point they are at. We are extremely attentive to that mentality.”

Showroom Consultant **Jennie Persell**, who came to Immerse from a local plumbing distributor, and Miller, are even blunter about what the Immerse team has built in a short amount of time.

“There isn’t a more beautiful showroom in St. Louis,” Persell says.

“We used to say we have the best showroom in St. Louis,” Miller adds. “Now, we say we have one of the best in the country.” 



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