

At A Glance

High Peaks Chair Lift Painting has carved a niche in the industrial painting business by convincing resort owners that they can do painting more efficiently than the resorts could do on their own.

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Sherwin-Williams Industrial Urethane Alkyd Enamel has proved to be an effective product in this often unpredictable weather environment.

Brian Scheid of High Peaks Chair Lift Painting LLC rides a chair at Big Sky, Montana

PEAK PAINTER

“SKI BUM” FINDS NICHE PAINTING CHAIR LIFTS

The license plate on Brian Scheid's truck reads “I SKI BUM,” but don't believe it. True, the native of Sun Prairie, Wis., is passionate about downhill skiing. And like the prototypical ski bum, he has sought employment that offered as many rewards in prime lift tickets as it did in salary.

But few ski bums exhibit Scheid's entrepreneurial can-do. His present enterprise, High Peaks Chair Lift Painting, LLC, certainly gets him to the slopes but he's usually there only to paint the lift equipment these days. From the Poconos of Pennsylvania to the Rockies of the West, Scheid has carved a niche with his innovative painting operation.

A modest start

Back in 2002, Scheid could indeed be called a ski bum. He spent winters snowmaking and grooming trails and summers doing odd jobs, one of which was supervising a crew of visiting Europeans who signed up to paint chairlifts for a contractor. Scheid enjoyed the work as well as the opportunity to spend more time in his favorite ski areas, even in the off-season.

But when his employer's cash-flow problems left Scheid out on a job and short a couple paychecks, Scheid proposed a deal. He'd quit pressing the boss for his back-pay if he could keep the spray equipment he had with him.

“It was a sprayer, a pump, a ladder and some tools,” recalls Scheid. “I didn't think I was going to get paid otherwise so we talked and I took it. From that point on, I was on my own.”

What Scheid also took from his employer were some lessons in managing a painting firm. Scheid had observed and made note of instances in which the contractor had stretched his resources thin, relied too heavily on credit and was unable to overcome the challenges of managing multiple projects from offsite locations.

So with that insight in tow, he set out to build his own customer base. With a blanket email to some 400 members of the National Ski Management Association, he identified his fledgling company and told prospects how he could address the fading issues, blistering and aesthetic appearance of the lift towers and chairs as well as safely perform the tricky task of painting them.



High Peaks Chair Lift painters are well-versed in industrial painting safety, according to company president Brian Scheid.

guarantees he'll have nearby coatings products and support wherever his work takes him — help him do so. His painters grind and sand problem areas on towers, chairs and terminals, spot prime with Sherwin-Williams Kem Kromik® Universal Metal Primer, and top coat with a single airless-sprayed coat of Sherwin-Williams Industrial Urethane Alkyd Enamel.

"This is my favorite new product," says Scheid, a recent convert to Industrial Urethane Alkyd Enamel. "I had a job in Pennsylvania where we were using a different paint and the condensation would come in at the end of the day and make a mess of our work. But this material dries fast and it dries hard. It's saved me a lot of times."

Other challenges Scheid cites are storms that can rise quickly in the mountains and wide temperature swings. But the generally dry climate in his working environments and unoccupied locale — usually no overspray concerns — offer an excellent painting environment, Scheid reports.

To date, Scheid has found a lot of repeat business and converts from those who had once tried painting lifts with their own crews. One of those is Kevin Shank, mountain manager at Big Sky, for whom Scheid completed several lifts this summer.

"We had hoped to achieve better quality painting, and I feel we've done that," says Shank. "Part of the reason is that we were doing it with people we'd be getting off the street. Brian's people are better supervised and he knows how to get it done. And the cost is very comparable to us doing it ourselves."

Winter routine

The painting season lasts a little longer in both the Northeast and the Midwest than it does in the West, and Scheid is able to complete projects with local help in those locations in late spring and early fall. But usually by October, Scheid is settling into his winter routine of operating a trail groomer at a Wisconsin ski resort and scouting jobs for the following painting season, a task which occasionally manages to reconnect him with his passion.

"I had scheduled a meeting with the mountain manager of a highly exclusive club, residence and ski village in Montana," he says. "We were going to scout the job and I thought I better put my ski stuff in the truck — just in case."

"So I get to the club and the manager says, 'You got your stuff? Let's go!'"

"So we *had* to go up every chair lift. And the only way down was to ski down..." It was just another day at the office for this ski bum — er, industrial painter.

He found his biggest competition came not from other contractors, but his potential customers themselves.

"They've usually used their own maintenance crews to paint lifts in the past," says Scheid. "But more often than not, they'd just paint over the top of everything without any surface preparation and not do the job right. Rust blistering generally remained an issue.

"So I needed to convince them that I could do the job right, I could do it safely and that I could do it more cost-effectively than they could do it themselves."

Student painters

Scheid's email netted about a half dozen responses. By the next summer he was at work, and the business has grown steadily since. For paint crews, he turns to ski bums, recruiting students from his alma mater, the Gogebic Community College Ski Management program in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Since the window of painting opportunity, particularly out west, fits neatly into the school schedule, it's a perfect source of willing labor for Scheid.

"It's kind of a treat for them to come out here," says Scheid from a project at Big Sky Resort near Big Sky, Montana. "That is, until they start working."

Once Scheid secures a project, he'll rent a condominium in which he and his paint crew — usually from three to six students — will reside during the project, which typically runs from four to eight weeks. After a considerable investment in safety training, the crews usually work 10-hour days which they tolerate well, given their age and general acclimation to the thin air they find working at altitudes as high as 11,000 feet.

Scheid does his best to simplify the projects, and high-performance products from Sherwin-Williams — as well as a national distribution network that