

HouseMaster operates 352 franchise locations that provide home inspections to 48 states and 10 provinces in Canada.



# 'UPPING THE ANTE'

*Even after 27 years, New Jersey-based home inspector HouseMaster says it continues to push for further improvement in its levels of service, technology and marketing.* —ALAN DORICH

**W**HILE SOME REAL ESTATE INSPECTION firms see their role as merely writing reports for customers, Kathleen Kuhn says HouseMaster goes the extra mile. "You really have to provide a unique and comprehensive service experience," the president and CEO declares.

Based in Bound Brook, N.J., HouseMaster operates 352 franchise locations that provide home inspections to 48 states and 10 provinces in Canada. The company's inspectors document the conditions of all major, accessible elements of homes, highlighting both the problems and the positive aspects they encounter.

HouseMaster notes that it not only serves homebuyers, but also the sellers. "More and more home sellers are opting to have their house inspected before a buyer comes along," the company says. "Today's seller wants to close their dealing knowing they made a full disclosure of the condition of the home sold."

HouseMaster has its roots in AMC Property Evaluations, founded by Kuhn's father, Ken Austin, in 1976. "He was the son of an entrepreneur who was in his [own] restaurant business," Kuhn explains. "He had always dreamed of getting into his own service business."

It was through AMC that Austin developed formalized training for home inspectors and standardized inspection reports. After he had experienced success and growth with AMC, Austin started HouseMaster in 1979. Kuhn notes that AMC became HouseMaster's first franchise.

"[Austin] was the first one to franchise in the home inspection industry," Kuhn says. By 1993, the company had 175 U.S. offices, as well as an international office in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

In 1987, HouseMaster's Technical Staff also founded the National Institute of Building Inspectors ▷

## PROFILE

**HouseMaster**  
[www.housemaster.com](http://www.housemaster.com)  
**Employees:** 500  
**HQ:** Bound Brook, N.J.  
**Service:** Inspection  
**Kathleen Kuhn, president and CEO:** "We've been able to differentiate ourselves from competitors and remain a leader in the market."

▷(NIBI) to standardize training and testing for its franchises. Today, all of HouseMaster's inspectors are provided training through the institute or an equivalent organization.

Additionally, its training is offered to home inspectors outside of HouseMaster. Kuhn notes that NIBI is a state-certified vocational school.

Over the years, Kuhn says the company has completed almost two million inspections and generated almost \$500 million in inspection fees. Today, Austin is semi-retired, but still remains HouseMaster's chairman.

"He's very much an industry icon," Kuhn states. "We've been able to differentiate ourselves from competitors and remain a leader in the market."

### Family Franchise

ORIGINALLY, KUHN HAD NO INTENTION OF ENTERING HER father's business. After graduating from Montclair State University with a bachelor of science degree in quantitative analysis and marketing, she worked for four years at AT&T in a field marketing position.

She describes her years at AT&T as a learning experience where she discovered she possessed her family's entrepreneurial gene. "I had the desire to have far more control over my own destiny," Kuhn explains.

In 1985, Kuhn joined HouseMaster as a franchisee. After operating her own franchise for 10 years, she was promoted to a headquarters management position. In 1995, she was again promoted to vice president of marketing, and in 2000, became CEO. Two years later, Kuhn was named president.

### Being There

KUHN SAYS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT DISTINGUISHES HouseMaster from its competitors is its inspection guarantee. "That is something completely unique in the industry," she declares.

The local HouseMaster franchisee will reimburse customers for eligible repair expenses on conditions that may develop after closing. One example, Kuhn says, is a hot water heater.

During the process, the HouseMaster inspector will inspect the home's hot water heater and rate the system in either satisfactory, fair or poor condition. If the system was found to be in satisfactory condition and then requires repairs within 120 days after the inspection, the local HouseMaster office will reimburse the customer for a majority of the cost to repair or replace the heater.

"That really gives the customer piece of mind that we're [dedicated] to giving our most-thorough best every time," Kuhn says.

She says it also convinces customers of its expertise. "We know what we're talking about," Kuhn states. "We don't expect problems to be found after the inspection."

Additionally, Kuhn says HouseMaster takes the time to educate its customers through aspects of the inspection, and has recently introduced an Inspection Resource Guide to the process.

The guide helps the customer make the most out of their inspection by highlighting what will be included in the inspection, what can't be included and what to do after the inspection. The guide also features repair statistics from a survey of 2,000

homes HouseMaster has inspected.

Kuhn explains that the statistics allow customers to put their inspection findings into a meaningful context. In addition, the guide also includes a repair DVD demonstrating 15 maintenance items. "We always encourage home maintenance and the DVD helps us do this," she states.

### Redefining the Structure

HOUSEMASTER HAS WORKED TO REDEFINE ITSELF OVER THE last three years, Kuhn says. "We had to define where we needed the company to go, how to get there and then make sure we had the infrastructure to support the growth," she explains. "It was really time to move the company from a more entrepreneurially managed company to a professionally structured organization."

Kuhn says the company has invested heavily in its technology. This has included making its inspection reports available online. When HouseMaster completes an inspection, she explains, it will upload the report onto a password-protected Web site accessible to its customers. "While we're the most established and respected name in the industry, you always have to be innovating," she says. "We are always upping the ante in terms of the level of service, technology and marketing."

Additionally, the company has introduced a new branding campaign to distinguish itself from its competitors. Kuhn notes that the company's two main competitors include independent inspectors and other franchises.

"Our competitors, over the years, have really followed our lead in terms of marketing terminology and visuals," she says. "It was time to better define our brand again."

This resulted in a new tag line for the company: "HouseMaster. Home Inspections. Done Right." According to Kuhn, this campaign was developed through an in-depth look at competing industry messages and discussions with recent home inspection customers and real estate professionals.

What HouseMaster found, Kuhn says, was that it was well-positioned as the company that could be consistently relied upon to get the job done right.

"From the time you call our office, 'til after closing, your inspection is going to be handled [and] it's going to be done right," she says. "[The] second part of the branding really focuses on the fact that we really are the master – totally expert, but always committed to learning more and sharing knowledge."

A third step for the company was appointing its new COO, Michel Phillips. Phillips has had 30 years of experience in franchise management and consulting, and most recently served as senior vice president at New World Restaurant Group.

According to Kuhn, the company needed to bring in an associate who had worked within the franchise industry, but from outside of HouseMaster. "His long and impressive career as both franchisee and franchisor gives him a unique and broad understanding of franchising, and has already proven to be a great asset to our organization," she said in a statement. ■

### ZELLMARK

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