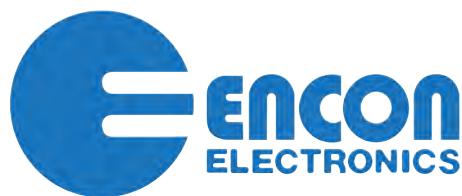




Custom Gate & Access

PAVING THE PATH



Encon Customer Success Stories
& Unique Installations

Custom Gate & Access

In 1993, David Hagelthorn crafted a custom wooden gate for a friend, leading to the founding of Custom Gate & Access, Inc. Recognizing a demand for unique, personalized gates, his expertise in craftsmanship and electronics allowed him to carve out a distinctive niche in the gate industry.

Over the past 32 years, the company has served clients across the Bay Area from its two offices. They specialize in a diverse range of custom products, including wooden driveway gates, garden gates, garage doors, arbors, and more.

Encon Electronics has been a trusted supplier to Custom Gate & Access since the company's inception. This longstanding partnership, combined with Hagelthorn's unique journey into the craft, makes him an ideal subject for the second segment of our "Paving the Path" series.

In this interview, Hagelthorn shares his expert insights on launching a business, surpassing customer expectations, and other valuable strategies.

How did you get involved in the industry?

In 1993, a friend of mine who was in the ornamental iron business asked me if I could build a wooden gate for one of his clients. After building that one gate, I received two referrals for wooden gates. It was clear that it was a business opportunity for me.

Working out of my single car garage, I launched Custom Gate & Access, Inc. I had a passion for craftsmanship and a vision for something unique. I took my background in furniture design and natural aptitude for engineering and electronics and set out to create custom wooden automatic gates that combined beauty, function, and technology.

From the beginning, my focus was on serving high-end clients who wanted more than just a gate—they wanted a statement piece that reflected the character of their home. Today, that vision has grown into a multi-million-dollar company proudly serving the San Francisco Bay Area. While the scale has changed, our commitment to quality, design, and personal service remains the same.

What are some common misconceptions clients have about gate installations, and how do you meet their expectations?

In high-end residential settings, clients often assume automated gate installations are purely aesthetic upgrades that can be completed quickly and with minimal planning. A common misconception is that automation is a simple add-on to any gate, without considering the technical and logistical requirements—such as power access, proper wiring, safety features, and integration with home automation or security systems.

Another frequent misunderstanding is that all automation systems offer the same performance and durability. In reality, selecting the right motor, control system, and materials is essential to ensure smooth operation, low maintenance, and a seamless look that complement the property's architecture.

To meet and exceed expectations, I take a collaborative, consultative approach. I often work closely with architects, landscape designers, and security consultants to ensure the gate aligns with the overall design vision and technical requirements of the property. I also take time to understand the homeowner's lifestyle and preferences, offering tailored solutions and clearly explaining how different options will function in their specific setting.

Open communication is key. I provide my customers detailed timelines and try and be transparent with pricing. These steps help to ensure that the customer is satisfied with the final product and that it enhances both the visual appeal and long-term functionality of their home.



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What project in your career proved to be the most challenging and/or inspiring and why?

We're often asked to take on unique and unconventional projects—and we love the challenge. Over the years, we've built everything from sliding decks that reveal hidden hot tubs to motorized TV cabinets that swing out from the wall.

Our expertise extends to custom wood-and-steel structures, including tennis court fencing, hot tub surrounds, and even handcrafted Soji screens that add a touch of elegance and privacy to any space. If it involves creative design, precision engineering, and quality craftsmanship, the more we like it.



What are the biggest challenges that the gate industry faces today, and how are you addressing them in your business?

As a local installer, we're navigating real challenges from skyrocketing prices to managing customer expectations. Today, motors, control panels, steel, and even lumber are harder to source and more expensive. To minimize the impact of rising costs, we maintain strong relationships with our suppliers like Encon Electronics.

We help our clients with budgeting by providing tiered options and honest advice to help them make smart, cost-effective choices. We also keep key items in stock and offer alternatives when needed—without compromising quality.



Our team does its best to stay on top of client requests for mobile access, cameras, or smart home integration. We're trained in the latest technology so we can help our customers choose systems that match their needs and setup.



How long have you been a customer of Encon and can you share your experience working with Encon over the years?

I've been with Encon since day one of my business. Back then, it was just Betty, Larry, Joe, and Lawrence holding things down in the warehouse. We've grown alongside each other, and I've always had a great relationship with the team. Honestly, it feels more like a friendship than a business partnership at this point—and that's something I really value.

How has technology influenced the design and functionality of your custom gates and/or the installation of access systems in recent years?

In recent years, technological advancements have significantly transformed the design and functionality of our gates and access systems. Modern electric gates now feature Internet of Things (IoT) capabilities, allowing homeowners to control and monitor their gates remotely via smartphones or tablets. The adoption of advanced biometric systems, such as fingerprint and facial recognition technologies, has elevated the security of our gate installations. Additionally, sustainability has become a key focus in our designs. We are increasingly utilizing eco-friendly materials such as FSC rated wood.



Clients are seeking gates that not only provide security but also complement their property's architectural style. By offering customized designs using various materials, including wrought iron, aluminum, and wood, we can create unique and visually appealing gates.

What new or coming soon products are you most excited about?

We are particularly excited about the integration of artificial intelligence in access control, which allows for predictive analytics, behavior recognition, and automated threat detection, enhancing overall security measures. These technological advances will allow us to provide our clients with gate systems that are not only secure and functional but also tailored to their aesthetic preferences and environmental values.

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What has been the key to your company's success in this competitive industry?

The key has been a commitment to craftsmanship, customization, and client relationships. From the beginning, we chose not to compete on volume, but on quality—focusing on high-end, made-to-order gates that blend design, functionality, and lasting value. That focus has allowed us to build a strong reputation in the San Francisco Bay Area and develop a loyal client base that often returns or refers others.

Can you highlight a particular decision that helped propel the business forward?

One pivotal decision was our early integration of automation and access control into custom wood gate designs. At the time, very few companies were combining traditional craftsmanship with modern technology in a seamless, reliable way. By offering both design and smart functionality under one roof, we carved out a unique niche in the market.

Additionally, our willingness to take on custom, one-of-a-kind projects—from sliding decks to Soji screens—has helped differentiate us and opened the door to exciting collaborations with architects, designers, and homeowners who want something truly original.

What advice would you give to someone just starting in the custom gate and access systems installation industry?

First and foremost: master your craft. Whether it's woodwork, metal fabrication, electronics, or access control systems, you need a solid foundation of technical skills. Invest in training, certifications, and time in the field. Clients can tell when you're detail-oriented and confident in your work—and that's what earns trust.

Start small but think long-term. I began in my garage, but I treated every project like it mattered—because it did. Doing great work, being reliable, and standing by your product builds a strong reputation. In this industry, word-of-mouth is incredibly powerful so work with integrity. Don't overpromise just to get the job.

Be honest about timelines, budgets, and limitations. Clients respect transparency, and long-term relationships are far more valuable than short-term gains. Find your niche. Whether it's high-end residential gates, modern steelwork, or smart access systems, it helps to specialize. You'll be able to refine your skills, stand out from competitors, and attract the kind of clients you want to work with.

Finally, surround yourself with good people. You can't do it all forever—train others, build a reliable team, and create systems that maintain quality even as you grow but also complement their property's architectural style. By offering customized designs using various materials, including wrought iron, aluminum, and wood, we can create unique and visually appealing gates.

