

Though he didn't originally aim to get into the pressure washing business, Steve Dershimmer of Professional Equipment Centre has been in the field for close to 40 years. "I was a political science/Russian-area studies major, but by the time I finished college I didn't want to live in DC or work for the government," Steve found. He and his wife stayed in the Penn State area. "We started a furniture business so we could work together," says Steve. After a short while, though, Steve says, "I got antsy dealing with little old ladies of either sex in the furniture business. I wanted something else to get my fingers into."

A college friend who had majored in industrial engineering provided encouragement to set up a pressure washer jobbership because of the strip mines in the area. Steve recalls, "Richard Sinclair would periodically show up at my house with a model 4400 and show me what it would do, and say, 'These things are pretty interesting.'" Steve was involved part-time at first, "But we got busier and we needed more things done so I backed out of the furniture business," he says.

"Where we started, it was primarily mining and supporting industries with heavy equipment," Steve recalls. Sales involved taking a pressure washer around and showing what it could do. "At the beginning of this business, I felt like I had to be a chameleon—be prepared to demonstrate what the equipment would do in a strip mine, but then turn around and talk with the vice president because it was such a significant amount of money compared with what it is today. The person in charge wasn't going to give his approval unless he had a pretty good idea of what it would do. Then a pick-up truck was \$4,000 and a pressure washer \$3,000, but now a pick-up is \$25,000 and the pressure washer may be \$10,000 so the vice president says, 'Don't bother me with that if the guys in the shop are happy.'"

Steve recalls, "Pressure washers were needed in mining to cool the engines. When they have a hydraulic line break on a piece of strip mining equipment, oil spills everywhere; meanwhile, after it's repaired, the cooling fan is pulling in oil closely followed by dust. The radiator clogs up and overheats and costs \$35,000 to replace. Before we came along, they would have to take the radiator off the equipment and to a radiator shop to clean. When we showed up, we could clean the radiator in eight minutes right where it sits and see the temperature drop 50–60 degrees." As you might expect, this was warmly welcomed. "Sometimes we couldn't get off the property with the demonstrator model," Steve remarks.

On one sales call, Steve saw a front loader coming over a hill, and "I couldn't believe the size of that thing," he reports years later. "It could pick up four pick-up trucks in the bucket; it had four tires about 12 feet in diameter that cost \$13,000 each and had to

be replaced twice a year." To clean the machine, since it was winter, "We had to cut a hole in the ice and try to get it going fast enough not to freeze." The results were successful. "They wanted it," says Steve.

Another impressive display of what the equipment could do came from a late Friday afternoon referral. Steve recounts, "I went out on a Friday afternoon in the wintertime, and they had the biggest drag line in Pennsylvania. The railroad track rotated 360 degrees, but the welds were not holding so the car was about to fall, and the installation company was coming to repair it on Monday. It was covered in crater compound, an extreme pressure lubricant, which you can't touch with less than 2000 pounds pressure and heat. If they didn't get it off, it was going to create a fire when they tried to reweld it.

"They had had 12 men per shift, 24 hours a day, working with chipping tools and scrapers, and they had gotten nowhere after almost two weeks.

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I showed up with a 2,000 psi, \$8,000 unit, and in half an hour had cleared more than they had in two weeks.

"The vice president said, 'What's the price?' and I told him. He said, 'I'll give you the check today with two provisos: you leave that here, and I want you here tomorrow and Sunday to tend this machine, so if it fails, we can continue. I said 'OK.' It didn't fail, and we had it done by 1:00 Sunday. Since it was below freezing, we had a round robin group of guys bringing 55-gallon drums of water every 10 minutes because it would freeze if it sat there."

Location, Location, Location

Originally, Steve says, "I really didn't think location was particularly critical. When this business and the industry started, we were all going out and soliciting to do demonstrations at no charge to show what the equipment could do. Hotsy and the other manufacturers strongly encouraged us to go out and knock on doors—find something that's filthy and let the

machine do the talking, and it worked. We didn't think we needed a location because who was looking for a pressure washer?

"But, when we bought this location, I deliberately tracked what its advantage was to me because it's on a highway. It averaged being worth \$3500-\$4500 monthly, which was a lot more than the mortgage. It was people who came off the highway not knowing we existed—not previous customers.

"It shocked me. I did not expect that there was that much fall-off-the-highway business.

"I was able to buy my own property almost 20 years ago, which I heartily recommend, even though the MBAs would tell you to never invest in property. My counter to that is that it's the only way to have control over your own destiny. If your business is going good, your landlord may decide it looks good to him, or rent it to your competitor at a higher rate. I've seen a lot of funny things," Steve concludes.

Service Sells

Most of the equipment that PEC sells is hot water, but they also sell Barends cold water washers. "They're 100 miles away from us," Steve points out. "There's not much profit in cold water stuff, but we sell it to protect customers from buying stuff from the big box store that gives us all a bad reputation. After the second time they get less than 100 hours out of it, they find that maybe they can get something better for a little bit more money."

Steve has changed manufacturers a couple of times through the years, but has always tried to sell what he felt was the best equipment available. As he points out, "When I was working my way through college, I sold Mercedes Benz." As well as visiting factories, he explains how he identified the easiest machine to use: "I would say to somebody at the end of the day, 'Before we finish up, would you wash that truck out there?' And I would watch to see what machine they'd take."

In the 1970s, Steve observes, "There were lots of components that were not designed for use in pressure washers. The industry wasn't big enough to have specialized parts, so we cobbled stuff and made it work. It had a short life and it wasn't designed for the rigors of pressure washing. In the 1980s, we started to use things that were appropriately designed and stopped trying to use old-fashioned kerosene that had more water than fuel in the burners, and we started to have a lot better longevity on this stuff."

Part of Steve's desire for the best product comes from standing behind what he sells. "I try to treat people the way I'd like to be treated," is the principle he practices. "Part of what people pay for when they buy something from me is the fact that I'm going to stand behind it; I put my name out there and it's important to me. It's probably an archaic way of doing business," he concedes, "but I can't change."

With current manufacturer Hydro Tek, parts and labor are covered for repairs under warranty, "but I still have to send parts back, and I may have to drive three hours round trip to fix it." Steve recalls one (admittedly unusual) instance where a wire had not been properly crimped, causing erratic operation. "I had close to 26 hours of travel time," he says, before the loose connection was found and remedied.

Customers do notice and appreciate the care. Steve relates, "I had a man in the shop some years ago who said, 'You ever wonder why I come in here with my equipment for repairs?' I said, 'I presume you're satisfied with the service.' He said, 'I am satisfied, but I don't know anything about the equipment, and I believe that if you don't know your meat you better know your butcher!'" Steve observes, "We seem to have the same customers until they retire or die—they don't seem to go somewhere else."



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The Changing Scene

In training sales people, according to Steve, "It used to take about a year to really figure out if someone was going to be able to do it." On average, one out of four did "after a pretty significant training program." Steve's plan: "I would have them working with the tech people first." They would have written material to study, and then be presented with hypothetical customers to analyze which would be the appropriate machine(s) to present to them. After service calls with a technician, to see the condition of machines after a couple of years and the positive relationships, the prospective salesmen would have a few days of solo sales calls before Steve went along to provide reinforcement. Steve says, "I had a number of guys who went on into other fields, but who had good success with their training here that translated into other industrial sales."

But, Steve says, "I don't think anyone's doing anything like that

anymore. For one thing, more of the customers are already familiar with pressure washing. For another, the price of pressure washers has come down so significantly that you're dealing with the people in the shop."

"We evolved about 20 years ago from having a truck set up for demonstrations to a van with parts for sale." The internet is obviously a factor in sales now, and though he does not have a large amount of on-line business, he does not think that is hurting sales.

Though located in Pennsylvania, their business was severely affected by Hurricane Katrina because of the transportation industry's response to rising fuel prices. "We were having the best year we'd ever had; after the hurricane hit, we didn't sell a single piece of equipment—hot or cold, new or used—from August to December." Since everybody considered cleaning a dispensable item, "everybody's truck looks bad so you're not losing business that way," according to Steve.

"We didn't start to see changes until 2007. We have a lot fewer customers. Those that are left are doing good business and have less competition, and we don't have a problem with receivables."

Steve foresees the pressure washer industry undergoing a split. "We've got big box store little cheap things that aren't going away," he says. On the other hand, "There's always going to be a market for good, big industrial-type units. We're getting less industry, but the ones here have to clean up after themselves with environmental regulations. Both manufacturers and providers of equipment have to be more professional than they've ever been, taking into account environmental aspects, proper amounts of chemicals and soaps, and more automated controls."

Though the services may change as the industry does, a business that treats customers the way they themselves want to be treated will still be a success. *cr*



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