

Committed to Excellence

By Kate Cline

WQP's Dealer of the Year shares his secrets to success

Founded in 1938, Culligan of Wheaton was the first Culligan USA franchise. Over the past seven decades, the company has seen its share of change, but one thing stays consistent: its commitment to both its customers and employees.

The company, based in Wheaton, Ill., began by renting “portable exchange” tanks, which were installed in customers’ homes, and had to be exchanged for fresh tanks. The company recharged the spent tanks at its regeneration facility in Wheaton. In the 1950s, the company began renting and selling softeners and filters that could be recharged at customers’ homes, which phased out the portable exchange tanks.

Today, the dealership continues to flourish under the leadership of company president Frank Panzeca, who bought the company late last year after 35 years as an employee, most recently as general manager. Culligan of Wheaton still rents and sells softeners and filters, plus bottle-less water coolers, and provides bottled water and salt delivery services.

Old-Fashioned Service

Customer satisfaction is Panzeca’s top priority, and he relies on the traditional values of providing good service and being honest with customers.

“Don’t try to reinvent the wheel,” he said. “There is only so much you can do, as long as you know you gave 110% to a customer [and] you were honest with them. We do everything we can in our power to help them solve their

problem—I think that’s the best advice anyone can give to anyone.”

As with many companies, Culligan of Wheaton has felt the effects of the economy. According to Panzeca, the only factor many consumers consider when looking for a water softener is price, which can make it difficult to compete with big-box stores.

Customers are “looking at the cheapest possible expense that they could have,” Panzeca said. “They don’t look at the long run ... service for the future [and] longevity of the softener.”

Panzeca and his staff combat this by taking the time to discuss the merits of Culligan’s softener units and the benefits of ongoing service with potential customers.

“The goal is to try to sit down with them ... [and] show them in writing the difference between the \$500 softener and the \$1,500,” Panzeca said. He added that “when we do the breakdown between the big-box [softener] and ours,” customers are much more likely to opt for a unit from his company.

Customer education is another facet of the company’s dedication to good service. According to Panzeca, this is not always an easy task, however. One of the company’s biggest challenges came when its main service area, DuPage County, first was connected to municipal water supplies from Lake Michigan. “The first thing customers thought was that they no longer needed a water softener because of this,” Panzeca said. “We had to educate customers about how the softener

could still be beneficial.”

Culligan of Wheaton continues to educate its customers today on the benefits of softeners and treatment systems. Many residents in the area continue to rely on private wells, so information on how to treat iron and sulfur odors is key. In addition, the company helps to educate its customers on any water quality issues raised by the press.

Family Atmosphere

Quality employees are another key to the dealership’s success. According to Panzeca, many employees are “lifers,” staying with the company for the duration of their careers, including two service professionals who have been with the company for more than 30 years.

The company keeps them around not only by providing competitive wages, a good benefits package and proper training, but also by creating a family atmosphere.

“We believe in treating our employees like part of our family,” Panzeca said. “I really believe that our dealership is ... a family-run operation. The only one I have here from [my] family is my son, but I feel that our whole crew is one big family.”

Employee education also is critical to keeping customer service high. The company ensures that its employees stay up-to-date on the latest technologies and techniques with regular training and staff meetings. “We send employees to Culligan local service trainings, and we have our own



Left: Staff members in front of the dealership. From left to right, front row: Frank Laurendi, Sean Panzeca and Frank Panzeca; back row: Tom Battaglia, Sue Hinds, Ken Hoidas and Devin Laube. Right: Office staff members Hinds and Anita Lester help keep the business running smoothly.



internal education program in place,” Panzeca said. “We meet every morning with our servicers and installers and discuss any situation or problem that they might encounter.”

Since becoming owner of the company, Panzeca has begun encouraging employees to become certified through the Water Quality Assn. (WQA)—starting with his own son, who started with the company last year. “The first thing I had him do was take a class with WQA,” Panzeca said, adding that his son ultimately passed the certification exam. Now, he will encourage all new employees to become certified as well.

Looking Toward the Future

According to Panzeca, the future of the industry is strong, especially as clean drinking water continues to be a leading issue.

“I think our industry is going to keep on growing,” he said. “I really believe as time goes on with the water needs and what is going on, water is going to be the most important thing in life. It’s our duty to educate the customer on the importance of the water needs.”

He added that technologies such as bottle-free coolers and purifiers “will be the thing of the future.”

Panzeca hopes that by continuing to provide quality customer service and cultivating a positive atmosphere for employees, the company will continue its success.

“We’ve been in business here since 1938,” he said. “Our goal is to continue giving good service, and hopefully we’ll be around another 100 years.”

Recognizing the Best

Panzeca was one of 12 dealers *Water Quality Products* featured in

2011 in its *Water Quality Products eNews* e-newsletter (formerly called *Dealer Insight*). In early 2012, readers voted to select Panzeca as the 2011 Dealer of the Year. *WQP* presented the award to him at his dealership in May.

Visit www.wqpmag.com to see video of the award presentation, plus an interview with Panzeca.

Do you know someone who should be recognized as a Dealer of the Month? E-mail your recommendations to wqpeditor@sgcmail.com. *wqp*

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