

# Recognizing the Best



**A.** Chip Howes participates in Aqua Serve's daily meeting and stretching exercises with two service technicians.  
**B.** Terri and Mark Kinder started Affordable Water in Jacksonville, Fla., in 1989. Their son Adam (left) joined the family business in 2012.  
**C.** Indianapolis Soft Water Service's trucks promote its line of bottle-free coolers—a product the company offers as part of its efforts to help customers stay environmentally friendly.

By Kate Cline

WQP's Dealers of the Year offer advice for business success

Each month, *Water Quality Products (WQP)* highlights a successful dealer as Dealer of the Month. Each of these dealers is a leader in the industry, using creative and innovative methods to increase business and service customers.

Early in 2013, *WQP* readers voted to select the 2012 Dealer of the Year, and the results came in a three-way tie between Mike Schmitt and Chip Howes of Aqua Serve, Broomfield, Colo.; Mark and Terri Kinder of Affordable Water, Jacksonville, Fla.; and Jessica and Ben Larson of Indianapolis Soft Water Service Inc., Indianapolis.

## FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN WATER

Mike Schmitt and Chip Howes, owner and operations manager, respectively, of Aqua Serve in Broomfield, Colo., run their business with just a few simple goals in mind.

"No. 1 is to pay all our bills and keep the people we have employed doing beneficial work, and to do it safely and without property damage, and to enjoy the work," Schmitt said.

To them, it is not about hitting a certain number or increasing sales by a certain percentage—but that does not mean they are complacent when it comes to tackling water treatment challenges.

"Mike is an engineer and knows water

better than a lot of our competitors do, so we're not afraid to go after even the most challenging water issue, and our customers begin to learn that," Howes said. He and Schmitt even coined the term "opportunity water" to describe those challenging water quality situations.

Aqua Serve's business is split evenly between residential and commercial customers. "We specialize in the hospitality business: restaurants, hotels, hospitals, nursing homes—basically wherever they serve food," said Schmitt, who describes Aqua Serve as a classic dealership. The company also does some bottled water and coffee service.

No matter what type of client they are dealing with, customer service is key. The company prides itself on offering comprehensive water treatment solutions to its customers.

"We don't just sell [a] water softener to [a] restaurant, we're part of their team to get clean glassware and dishes and silverware on the table for their customers," Schmitt said. "So, a lot of times, maybe we get involved in stuff that we shouldn't, but that's part of the total program that we offer."



Aqua Serve also places a high value on the quality of products it installs, opting for the best equipment, even if that means it is more expensive up front. "There's that old saying: 'You can explain price one time or answer for the lack of quality forever,'" Howes said.

## Creative Education

A final key to Aqua Serve's success is an emphasis on education. Five of the company's eight employees are qualified as Certified Water Specialists by the Water Quality Assn., including Schmitt, a CWS-V, and Howes, a CWS-VI.

Schmitt ensures his employees are up to date with a daily morning meeting that offers some informal education coupled with group stretching exercises. "That becomes not only a stretching exercise to limber everybody up so that they don't get injured during the day, but also a point of conversation where they can kick around stuff," he said. "Sometimes it's 10 minutes, sometimes it's half [an] hour—it depends on how juicy it gets."

According to Schmitt and Howes, flexibility of mind is just as important as flexibility of body to survive in the business world.

"Don't do it the same way you've always done it just because that's the

Mike Schmitt, owner of Aqua Serve, enjoys a meal with employees

## editor's emphasis dealer of the year

way you've always done it," Howes said.

"My biggest advice is to adapt. You have to adapt to a lot of things because things are changing," Schmitt added. "You have to think out of the box."

### FOCUS ON FAMILY

Like many dealerships, Affordable Water in Jacksonville, Fla., is a family business. But to Mark and Terri Kinder, family does not just mean their son, Adam—it extends to their employees, customers and community.

Prior to opening Affordable Water, Mark worked in a variety of positions in the water treatment industry, giving him the foundation to build a business from the ground up. The Kinders moved back to their native Florida in 1988, and about a year later Affordable Water opened its doors. Adam joined the dealership in January 2012. "People are excited to hear that Adam is our

son, and some have known him since he was six or seven years old," Terri said.

Many of Affordable Water's employees have become familiar faces to customers over the years. "We've been very fortunate to have a lot of them for more than 13 and 15 years, so that really gives you kind of a family feeling," Terri said. "People enjoy coming and actually talking and meeting the owners and employees. We have people that ask for the same employee over and over."

In turn, the Kinders keep employee morale high, providing staff with deserving job titles, good pay with overtime and full health benefits, plus perks like weekly employee breakfasts.

### Customers & Community

Affordable Water bases its customer service on a simple principal: "Treat your customers the way that you would want to be treated," Terri said.

The company prides itself on transparency in pricing and a low-pressure sales approach, using price sheets and giving customers time to think about a purchase before making a decision.

According to Terri, reverse osmosis systems have become the dealership's most popular offering due to increasing awareness of contaminants and local water quality, which has a strong chlorine odor. In addition to treatment system sales, the company has added sources of recurring income, such as rentals, delivery of products like soap and resin cleaner along its salt route (a customer favorite), and salt sales at its storefront.

"It's just nice to stay in touch with our customers," Terri said. "We have customers that have been coming to our salt sale, and we've watched their families grow."

Affordable Water also has worked to integrate itself into the local community

and give back. "We do a lot of local giving, just to show our heart for the community. We really love where we live, so we give back in other ways, even if it's just giving to the football players or ballet dancers or people that approach us," Terri said. "We try to give ... just to show our community that we're here for the long haul."

### Social Butterflies

Another way Affordable Water stays in tune with customers is through the Web. "That's really been a challenge, but that's how people find you nowadays. It's not the Yellow Pages anymore," Terri said.

She recommends companies Google themselves to see what others are saying about them, in addition to staying active on social media outlets. "Have fun with it," she said. "Post pictures of employees, jobs, location and interesting information about water treatment."

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While keeping up with its Web presence, Affordable Water also is exploring other technologies, such as iPads for sales presentations. "Also, we're working on a video for YouTube," Terri said. "That's kind of fun, too, and I think that also shows the personal side of our business."

## EFFICIENT & ECO-FRIENDLY

When Jessica and Ben Larson purchased Indianapolis Soft Water Service Inc. from Jessica's father in 2006, they had no idea they were diving into running a business just before the biggest recession the U.S. has seen in decades. Despite the economic challenges, the Larsons persevered, and the business is going strong.

"I think it forced some changes in increasing efficiency, tighter cost control [and] higher levels of customer service," Jessica said.

The Larsons are putting their

experience to use with the recent purchase of Noblesville Soft Water, which doubled the size of the business.

"The purchase of the company was really interesting since it was the exact same model Indianapolis Soft Water had when we purchased it from my father almost eight years ago," Jessica said. "We were far more experienced this time!"

The company serves a primarily residential customer base, offering softeners and filtration systems, rental programs and service for many brand names. According to Jessica, the company is working to increase its commercial customer base, aided by the addition of a line of commercial coolers last year.

## Battling the Box

Competition from big-box stores is one obstacle Indianapolis Soft Water Service faces, but Jessica sees it as both a challenge and an opportunity.

"It is very challenging to educate customers on why your product is superior to something they can purchase themselves," she said. "It is a challenge we accept and it helps form our business model—most of our work is by referral—[by] creating that customer service that leaves a good lasting impression."

She contends that dealers can take business back from big-box stores by offering customers their knowledge and expertise on water treatment issues.

## Environmentally Friendly Service

In addition to excellent customer service, Indianapolis Soft Water Service is known for its dedication to the environment. "I think what makes us unique is that we are truly local and we are probably the most environmentally concerned company in our market area," Jessica said. "All of our products reduce waste in some way, we re-appropriate whenever

possible and [we] just operate with an overall respect for the environment."

The company installs zero-waste filtration systems and high-efficiency softeners, and recently expanded its offerings to include bottle-free coolers.

Jessica believes that conservation will only continue to become more important to the industry. "I think we will see more and more water conservation in areas where it has not been an issue in the past, and I think it will be exciting to see how we can continue to improve water quality without wasting water," she said. "At least that is what I am hoping to see." *wqp*

Kate Cline is managing editor of *Water Quality Products*. Cline can be reached at [kccline@sgcmail.com](mailto:kccline@sgcmail.com) or 847.391.1007.

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