

From Customer to Dealer

By Abby Kleckler

Dealership grows business through new clients and chemical-free treatment

West Carolina Water Treatment opened its doors in January 1996 as a husband-wife team servicing the western counties of North Carolina. But when owners Jack and Joyce Brown decided to retire, they had to look no further for a new owner than their customers.

The Warwicks—Tom, Kathy and their son Dennis—had been customers of West Carolina Water Treatment for 10 years.

Dennis was interested in the elaborate water treatment system at his parents' rental property and had recently graduated school and was looking for a career path.

In early 2009, the husband-wife team transitioned to a mother-son team when the Warwicks bought West Carolina Water Treatment. Dennis does all of the fieldwork, sales, system engineering and servicing of approximately 750 accounts, while Kathy handles the office operations. Tom is more of a silent partner who made the purchase possible.

Finding New Business

More than four years after purchasing the business, Dennis has already faced the challenges of growing a business in a tough economy.

"When we took over, for the first year, we stayed fairly well insulated from the decline, but the lack of movement in real estate and new home building stunted some of our growth," he said. "When we weren't able to develop new accounts, we just had to really dig in and focus on servicing our existing accounts."

During the past year, West Carolina Water Treatment has sought new sources to grow its business.

A few of its local competitors were not able to make it through the tough economic times, and ended up closing their doors for good.

"We've seen a tremendous amount of growth in servicing the customers that another company is no longer around to take care of," Dennis said.

In one instance, Dennis was able to forward all calls from the telephone number of a previous competitor to his phone, once forwarding became available. All of the people who have stickers on their equipment

that say "For service, call ..." from that company will now ring to West Carolina Water Treatment.

The business also has found some success in community water systems that may service a dozen homes, or community springs or wells.

"Residential is really our bread and butter, but the community systems have been a good foot in the door, because you deal with a homeowners' association or some sort of association, but you get contact with a lot of people," Dennis said. "While the project might only encompass a small system in the beginning, you can get a lot of peripheral work that comes up from that."

Varying Rural Water

The western counties of North Carolina are largely rural, creating additional challenges. Most of West Carolina Water Treatment's customers use well water, so their needs vary quite a bit, according to Dennis.

As an independent dealer, the company does not have some of the benefits of advertising and other resources that franchises might, but remaining independent is important to him.

"By not being a franchisee, I'm not locked into a particular set of products or particular marketing strategy," Dennis said. "Having a wide array of products at my disposal helps me face each set of challenges individually."

High iron levels are common in the area, and the naturally soft water suffers from low pH levels.

Dennis has focused on chemical-free water treatment systems for most of his customers.

"We use air as the oxidizing agent in most of our systems instead of chlorine or potassium permanganate," he said. "It's a more streamlined and simplified approach to iron and sulfur treatment. It creates a cleaner installation and is usually less expensive for companies."

These chemical-free systems have been successful in many areas, with the city of Asheville seeing especially positive results.

"The city of Asheville is nearby and it's a very liberal, progressive city in an otherwise very conservative part of the country," Dennis said. "The green movement has taken hold with a lot of

folks there."

These health-conscious customers are really drawn to chemical-free treatment, he added.

Marketing Outside the Box

In addition to marketing chemical-free products and gaining accounts from former competitors, West Carolina Water Treatment has learned to look beyond traditional ads in the Yellow Pages.

"People have become more savvy shoppers," Dennis said. "It used to be that you'd show up to somebody's house and talk to them about their filtration needs and that was the end of it. Now people are fact checking. They're shopping online for alternatives."

Dennis has found the company website to be a huge asset and is currently looking to do a major refresh. The site draws in a good amount of leads, but word of mouth and customer referrals are still its number one source of new business.

West Coast Water Treatment's name also can be found throughout town.

"We do some local print media, like sponsoring menus, and little things like that actually do generate some business," Dennis said. "It's relatively inexpensive and it maintains your local presence."

Educating Yourself

As West Coast Water Treatment continues to grow, Dennis has said he will likely hire another employee or two in the next year, and for both his business and other dealers, he finds education to be an important component.

"It makes the industry look bad when somebody's expectations aren't met and they don't get the correct product for their conditions," Dennis said. "Educate yourself and your technicians."

"I think knowing what a piece of equipment does is not enough. You need to know why and how it works as well, the underlying chemistry." *wqp*

Abby Kleckler is associate editor for *Water Quality Products*. Kleckler can be reached at akleckler@sgcmail.com or 847.391.1034.

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Kathy and Dennis Warwick with one of West Carolina Water Treatment's systems