

By Amy McIntosh

Making Informed Investments

Florida dealership spans 40 years & three locations

The origin of Mast Family Culligan dates back to 1975, when Dale Mast purchased the Fort Myers, Fla., franchise after entering the water treatment industry in the late 1960s. This year, the company celebrates 40 years in business in southwestern Florida.

Tony Mast, Dale's son and vice president of Mast Family Culligan, started working in the family business, "from the time I was old enough to get in the way," Mast said. "I liked the business. I was comfortable with it. I worked summers when I was in school, on the route trucks, on the service trucks. I did basically every job here, so it was something I knew, and it looked like a nice way to make a living."

Mast Family Culligan now spans three locations across southwest Florida. In addition to the Fort Myers branch, the company has locations in Sarasota and Tampa. The original Fort Myers location has 50 employees.

Mast Family Culligan is a member of the Water Quality Assn. and the International Bottled Water Assn., as well as the Florida Water Quality Assn. and the Southeastern Bottled Water Assn. Mast, who is on the steering committee for the Water Quality Research Foundation, believes

association membership is important to helping the company stay on top of water quality issues.

"I think it's beneficial to have [associations] looking out for us, on the legislative side especially," he said. "It's a way we can be proactive and not just reactive when something goes haywire."

The company's business is approximately 70% residential, 30% commercial customers. Mast finds more profitability in water treatment on the residential side, while the company's bottled water segment is more profitable with commercial customers.

Cultivating a Customer Base

Mast believes a good website is vital to attracting new customers, who typically turn to the Internet before picking up the phone to reach out to a company. The company invests heavily in its website, along with search engine optimization and marketing to make the website easier to find and navigate.

Because Fort Myers is a relatively small market, television advertising is fairly affordable, so Mast takes advantage of the low price point

to make a personal connection with the community. Mast, his father and his four children are in every commercial, which "really makes the phone ring," according to Mast.

Making sure customers are satisfied is key for Mast and his employees. "If you try hard to make the customers happy, they're going to stick with you and they're going to tell their friends about it," he said. "We all know keeping a customer is a lot cheaper and easier than finding a new one."

The Platinum Care program is one way Mast Family Culligan retains loyal customers. For an annual fee, residential customers who purchase the package on top of a drinking water or whole-house treatment system are covered for a year of service calls, parts and labor. Service technicians visit the customers



Mast Family Culligan's customers are approximately 70% residential and 30% commercial, with the bottled water business more profitable on the commercial side.

every other month to check the equipment, test the water and make any necessary repairs or salt or chemical refills, all of which are covered under the program.

"We have several thousand people that are on that service and they love it because it offers peace of mind," Mast said.

Navigating the Future

For Mast, the future of the water industry holds more questions than answers. The success of his company's bottled water business, for example, is difficult to predict based on current market trends.

"Bottled water has been shrinking in some areas of the country like crazy in the past seven or eight years," Mast said. "But some guys I know in the Culligan system are growing their bottled water business, so that's kind of a wildcard."

Mast also sees uncertainty in the future of sales models in the industry. Mast Family Culligan still employs a traditional sales model, with sales representatives traveling to customers' homes to offer demonstrations. "People want to be able to put something in their online shopping cart and buy it," Mast said. "It's harder and harder to get in front of those people. Are you always going to have a segment that is going to be OK with somebody coming to their house and spending a half an hour to an hour there, or is that eventually going to go away? I

don't know." Despite this perceived shift to online shopping, Mast has not yet noticed a significant difference among his customers, and finds that most customers are willing to welcome representatives into their homes for sales or service.

The future of Mast Family Culligan is a bit clearer, with the company's recent entry into the industrial market. About four years ago, the dealer-

ship purchased a small industrial and deionization company, built a new deionization plant in Fort Myers and hired an industrial sales team.

"We're really trying to focus and grow that segment of the business, because we really haven't been in that marketplace. We're hoping to really get

into the heavy commercial and industrial business more than we ever have," Mast said. "I think there is a huge potential for growth, especially in the southern half of Florida." **WQP**

Amy McIntosh is associate editor for WQP. McIntosh can be reached at amcintosh@sgcmail.com or 847.954.7966.

"If you try hard to make customers happy, they're going to stick with you ..."



FPS

WE KNOW PUMPS & SYSTEMS

After all, we've been moving water for more than 7 decades, consistently offering breakthrough innovations, robust products, and unmatched technical service. We've leveraged that expertise to develop reliable solutions for a number of residential, commercial, and industrial applications.

Experience Engineered Products. Experience Franklin.



Franklin Electric

franklinengineered.com

Write in 753