

By Kate Cline

Education for All

Connecticut dealership values learning for customers & employees alike

When the phone rings in the middle of the night, it can be a jarring experience. Is there an emergency? Is a family member in trouble? Is it just a wrong number?

For business partners James Bennett and Jeff Colasante, being ready for that middle-of-the-night phone call is simply part of running a water treatment dealership.

"If you call us at 11 p.m. on a Sunday, we answer the phone—not an answering service; it's us," Colasante said. "When you are dealing with an emergency, there is nothing more reassuring than a professional who knows you by name answering your call."

The 24/7 emergency service program is just one of the ways Bennett and Colasante meet the goals they set when they launched Bennett & Cole Water Solutions: to focus on customer education and provide high levels of service.

Service From the Start

Bennett and Colasante met while working for a Culligan dealership in Connecticut, and discovered that they shared a dream of opening their own water treatment business. Dream eventually became reality, and Bennett & Cole Water Solutions opened its doors in New Milford, Conn., in 2011.

The economy was still in bad shape when the business launched, but Bennett and Colasante used the downturn to their advantage. "When we first opened, the economy was very poor, but it allowed us to take advantage of great deals on equipment, lower shop costs and very low interest rates," Colasante said. "Service really proved to be a big part of our early success, as customers chose to repair units rather than replace." Since then, the economy has improved, allowing the dealership to make more sales while maintaining its strong service base.

Today, the dealership has four employees and services a customer base that is 75% residential and 25% commercial. Regardless of customer category, the company aims to provide personalized service with an emphasis on education.

Providing customers with accurate information has become key

in the Internet age—especially as awareness of contaminants such as radon, arsenic and uranium has increased over the past decade. "While there is a great deal of good information [on the Internet], there is also a great deal of bad information," Colasante said. "This only makes the need for a consultative approach more important, to help the customers sift through the information to make the best choice for them." As part of their consultative approach, Bennett and Colasante strive to not only provide customers with the right water treatment system, but also ensure they know how it works. "It's not enough just to remove the contaminant ... [we] explain to the customer how the system will do this," Colasante said.

The emergency service program is another key part of the dealership's customer service approach. Although all customers benefit from the program, the company's commercial customers have found it especially valuable. "Many use water as part of the manufacturing processes and cannot be without treatment for any length of time," Colasante said. "Our seven-days-a-week service policy makes us an invaluable partner to them."

Taking to Technology

The dealership aims to make regularly scheduled service as painless as possible for customers, using technology as a key tool. It communicates with customers to remind them of service dates, and confirms deliveries via text, phone or email one day beforehand. Customers are encouraged to be home during deliveries to allow staff to conduct a compli-

mentary 12-point equipment check.

Technology has been a major factor in keeping service on track. "Technology has completely changed our business, and if we don't embrace it, we could not possibly be as efficient as we need to be to be successful," Colasante said. The dealership has implemented everything from GPS to create efficient delivery routes, to accounting software to access customer information on smart devices, to calendar software to schedule appointments while on the go.

Bennett & Cole Water Solutions also has taken to technology for



James Bennett and Jeff Colasante focused on service when they opened their business in the midst of the economic downturn in 2011.

marketing, with most of the effort focused on its website, which serves as an education tool for customers. "Studies show most homeowners are researching on the Internet after 8 p.m., with peak time being between 10 p.m. and 12 a.m.," Colasante said. "Your website is your voice after hours." The dealership utilizes search engine optimization to drive traffic to its website, in addition to a more traditional technique: word of mouth. "By far the most referrals come from our current customers, who send their friends and coworkers to our website, and the website does the rest," Colasante explained.

Learning First

In order to educate customers, employee education must come first, and for Bennett and Colasante, the drive to learn is key. "Nothing is more exciting for our company than when a treatment problem comes up and we need to go back to the books to diagnose and properly design a system that will treat the water," Colasante said.

The dealership also works with a local laboratory and associations for additional continuing education. "As a small company, we live in

a virtual vacuum," Colasante said. "Listening to our competitors and understanding the challenges that are out there has helped us steer clear of trouble." The company belongs to the Water Quality Assn., Connecticut Well Water Assn. and Better Business Bureau.

Colasante advises other dealers to keep up with education in order to keep up with customers. "Don't underestimate your customers. They are very educated and well researched," he said. "Be well read and never stop researching the market and options. You must be a good communicator. Use all the tools at your disposal or you will be left behind."

In Colasante's view, the future of the industry looks bright—as long as dealers put those tools to use. "Technology has given us access to great information and new tools that will

allow us to move faster and deal with problems in more creative ways," he said. "It's a very exciting time to be in the water business." **WQP**

Kate Cline is managing editor of WQP. Cline can be reached at kcline@sgcmail.com or 847.391.1007.

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