

By Amy McIntosh

Southern Comfort

Mississippi dealership serves commercial/industrial & medical customers across five states

While many areas of the country are plagued with serious water issues, from drought to contamination, others are having better luck. Such is the case for Freeman Water Treatment, located in Jackson, Miss. In that part of the country, where water quality is relatively good and there are no shortages to speak of, the family-owned business maintains a steady stream of commercial/industrial and medical clients.

Evolving & Changing

Owner Pat Freeman has been immersed in the water treatment industry his entire life, with his father, grandfather and brother all involved in the business in some way. Freeman purchased his business in 1987, and with that came some of the existing dealership's customers. In 1996, Freeman started Water Fresh, a separate company dealing with only residential customers. He sold Water Fresh in 2005, and today Freeman Water Treatment handles only commercial/industrial and medical clients.

In 2012, Freeman moved to Arkansas to run the Arkansas branch of the dealership, located just outside Little Rock. He still owns both businesses and operates the Arkansas branch from his home. General manager Bill Jefferis, who has been with the company since 1992, manages the Mississippi location.

Although the dealership is located in Mississippi's capital, treatment opportunities are less abundant there than in other large cities. Because water quality in the area is generally good, the dealership has had to expand its service area beyond that of most dealerships. Freeman Water Treatment covers the entire states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Arkansas, as well as half of Tennessee.

Finding Employees

Between the Mississippi and Arkansas branches, Freeman Water Treatment has 11 employees. Because of the small staff and the large service area, Jefferis said it can be difficult to find qualified employees.

"I have to maintain people that can work this distance with a very small budget, a very small company and a very small workforce," Jefferis said. "And a lot of prayer."

Geography also plays a part in the dealership's struggle to find

experienced employees. "This industry is not known down here, so we don't have a pool of people to pull from. Trying to find people is a challenge because they don't know what we do," Jefferis said. "When I started working here, I hadn't heard of [the water treatment business]. I didn't even know this business existed. Had I lived in Los Angeles or Orlando [Fla.], I probably would have heard about it just because it's more prevalent."

Jefferis has had the most success finding employees through referrals. He considers referrals from existing employees to be great references.

"The main thing we hire on is integrity and character. If one of my employees says he has a friend or cousin who has mechanical skills and



Left: Although Freeman Water Treatment is located in Jackson, Miss., its service area spans five states.



Right: Owner Pat Freeman (right) has traveled to Africa to help build water treatment systems for the African Bible College.

he can vouch for [his] character, that's a really good reference," Jefferis said. "Because he's already working for you, he doesn't want to have a bad spot on his record."

Constantly Improving

Freeman Water Treatment's business is split between medical and commercial/industrial customers. Jefferis estimates that 80% of the dealership's service work is in the commercial/industrial segment, while anywhere from 50% to 70% of new sales are in the medical segment.

"There's a lot of clinic turnover of equipment at this time, and that could just be for the next couple years," Jefferis said. "The medical industry is becoming more attuned to needing a certain [quality of] water. When we first started doing basic water systems for blood analyzers, the requirements were very low. But now, almost all the blood analyzers in almost all the labs need a Type 1 water system for everything they do. The water quality in labs is becoming more crucial than it used to be."

In addition to serving its regular customers, Freeman Water Treatment is

involved with mission work. Freeman has a relationship with the African Bible College and has traveled to Africa to help build water treatment systems. The dealership also has donated money to build wells in India, and in the 1990s built a water treatment skid to provide clean water to victims of a flood in Honduras.

Jefferis is a Water Quality Assn. (WQA)-certified professional. Although he believes the benefits of association membership are not as important to his business as they would be to a residential dealership, Jefferis finds that WQA membership has benefited him personally. By taking advantage of educational and networking opportunities, he is able to grow the business and pass his knowledge and resources to his employees.

"[WQA membership] is a good marketing tool. It's a good networking tool for me personally, as a manager of the business," Jefferis said. "I have access to education. I learn from people in the association. I think the membership will become more important as we grow."

Jefferis currently is enrolled in WQA's Modular Education Program and plans to put some of his technicians through it as well. In addition to using the association's educational resources in day-to-day employee training, he sends staff to various training workshops to improve their skills.

Because Jefferis describes the dealership's location as "isolated" from the

"Trying to find [employees] is a challenge because they don't know what we do."

rest of the industry, his involvement in WQA has helped him learn more about the water industry in general.

"Just being in the WQA has opened my eyes to the rest of the world in this industry, because we never hear from anybody or see anybody being down here," he said. "The South has generally good water, so the industry can't be too strong down here, because there's not a large residential market. The residential market tends to drive the industry and tends to be the biggest market."

For Jefferis, the most important part of his business is customer interaction. He understands that his technicians are representatives of the dealership and strives to help employees understand the importance of customer interaction.

"I'm proud of my service technicians' abilities to interface with the customer and not just be wrench-turners, but be faces for the company," he said. "We have a good group of guys ... I'm really proud that most of the customers we contact always have good experiences with our service technicians." **WQP**

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