

By Amy McIntosh

Passing the Torch

Family-owned dealership prepares for the next generation

Customer satisfaction is key in any business operation, and no one knows that more than those at the helm of American Aqua Systems, located in Narragansett, R.I.

Brooks Porter opened American Aqua in 1982 after his aunt purchased a water treatment system for her farm. The company that sold her the system did not fulfill its promises, so Brooks took matters into his own hands. After he solved his aunt's water treatment challenge, he decided to teach himself about water treatment and open his own business. Eventually, his focus shifted to commercial and healthcare applications.

Brooks' son Teal Porter always knew that one day he would join the family business. After graduating from business school in 2004, Teal headed straight to American Aqua Systems.

"I began just doing the books and learning the business at the front of the house," Teal said. "Slowly but surely I began to learn the science, technology and concepts of water treatment and water purification. Here we are 11 years later, and this is my career."

Initially the company serviced independently owned dialysis clinics in New England. As regulations tightened, larger corporations began purchasing these clinics, equipping them with in-house water treatment providers. Brooks recognized this and expanded American Aqua Systems' capabilities to include commercial, industrial and laboratory applications.

American Aqua Systems serves all of New England, including Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York. Throughout this service area, there are no water shortages or serious contamination issues, but aging infrastructure has been a challenge that the company has been able to adapt to from location to location.

"We're talking about infrastructure that is over 100 years old. As time goes on and that infrastructure continues to deteriorate, it definitely adds an element of difficulty to designing exactly what a customer needs," Teal said. "Given our experience, we have a pretty good understanding

of what we're dealing with everywhere we go, which is really helpful in coming up with a solution for our customers."

Growth Spurt

American Aqua Systems started in Brooks' barn and remained there until 1999, when he built a 5,000-sq-ft facility to house the business. In 2014, a 4,000-sq-ft addition was built, creating a 9,000-sq-ft corporate headquarters that includes offices and a workshop for building water treatment systems.



Left: American Aqua Systems expanded its facility with a 4,000-sq-ft addition in 2014. Right: Teal Porter joined the family business in 2004, and plans to eventually take the helm from his father.



"This is the best time to get into this industry."

The company has four full-time and two part-time employees, but plans to double its workforce in the next three years.

"Now that we have the infrastructure, we are now coming up with a game plan to hire and build a workforce for tomorrow," Teal said.

Teal described the ideal candidate as someone who is young, fresh out of school, and willing and eager to learn a new trade. A technical background is helpful, he said, but not necessary.

"What we do in this industry, they don't really teach in school," Teal explained. "You can learn the basics of science and engineering, but [for] what we do and how specialized this industry is, they can be inexperienced in the trades and still gain a really strong understanding if they start fresh." Hands-on training helps employees learn the importance of tailoring a treatment system to a customer's specifications.

"It's not cut and paste. It's design-build, based on the specifications that our customer needs," Teal said. "That's very educational. I learn from seeing how something works in front of me and trying to figure [it] out for myself, building it up and breaking it apart and building it up again. That seems to be really effective in our training approach."

Reaching Out

American Aqua Systems follows a concentrated business model that has been in development for more than 30 years. Teal said the company aims to provide solutions that are as efficiently run and maintained as possible, with no hidden costs for the consumer. Customers know their costs upfront and are confident that service technicians will be available when needed.

"We try to be as transparent as possible with what we're doing. I think our customer base has been with us for as long as they have because they love that and appreciate that," Teal said. "I think that has given us a competitive edge. Even though we're small, it's given us a competitive edge in a very large market."

Teal finds word-of-mouth and customer referrals to be the most effective marketing tools. A good website is also vital, he said. "It's your first impression with a lot of people and it can really put you on a level playing field with a bigger competitor," he said.

In addition to information about the company's products and services, American Aqua Systems' website has a Client Access area where customers can log in and view a detailed record of their service history.

"That was actually something that our Web designer suggested, and it was a great idea," Teal said. "It gives customers peace of mind knowing that they can get any information they need at any time."

The Road Ahead

Eventually Teal will take over the business from his father. In the meantime, he has some advice for other dealers.

"In this industry, you really need to find something to focus on instead of trying to do everything and learn all facets of the business," he said. "Find something you can really excel at that may relate to the area you live in or the types of customers you'd like to go after." Teal attributes American Aqua Systems' success to finding its niche market and honing its skills there.

As water quality and supply issues become more prevalent worldwide, Teal believes the industry will continue to grow in importance.

"Water is more of a precious element now than it was when my dad started the company in 1982," Teal said. "This is the best time to get into this industry. I don't see a downside

anywhere in my career in the future."

The future of American Aqua Systems looks bright. The company is debt-free thanks to a client base made up mostly of nonprofits and other customers capable of surviving a recession. Teal's current focus is building up the company's workforce and maintaining its

relationships with customers.

"I'm pretty much engrossed in the industry and I'm excited to be the next generation to pass it down to when the time comes," he said. **WQP**

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

innovative ultraviolet disinfection drinking water systems



UVDynamics can help you achieve all of your goals!
Let's make 2016 the best year yet.
Together.



FREE shipping to US dealers*

UV Dynamics

www.uvdynamics.com
london-ontario-canada

800.667.4629

519.452.7520

Systems* tested and certified by WQA against:
NSF/ANSI 61 (materials safety)
NSF/ANSI 372 (lead free compliance)
CSA B483.1

*see wqa.org for model information

*some conditions apply

Write in 754