

# Creating a Legacy

A look at the water industry's  
multi-generational family businesses

BY KATE CLINE

Family businesses abound in the water treatment industry, with many now helmed by the third or even fourth generation. Here WQP highlights three such dealerships—McKinney Artesian Well & Pump Supply Co. of Plaistow, N.H.; Culligan of Marlette, Mich.; and Abendroth Water Conditioning of Fort Atkinson, Wis.—as examples of the hard work and values that go into running a successful family business in this industry.

# QUALITY TIME

Being a water treatment dealer often means working long hours—but John McKinney, owner of McKinney Artesian Well & Pump Supply Co. Inc. in Plaistow, N.H., views those hours as time well spent, because being in a family business means that time often is spent with family.

John's grandfather, Chester McKinney, started McKinney Well in 1923 as a well drilling business. The company began offering water treatment services in the 1950s, which meant mainly water softening at that time. Chester passed the business onto his son, Victor McKinney, who ran the business for more than 40 years.

Today, John is a third-generation owner, and a member of the fourth generation—John's son, Jake McKinney—is now involved as service manager.

The company, which works primarily on residential installations, has had to reduce its staff in recent years due to the economic downturn and unstable housing market, resulting in a team that John describes as “mean and lean.” He also could describe it as all-in-the-family: The staff of four includes John; Jake; John's cousin, Mike Willey, who handles well drilling; and John's wife, Suzette, the company's bookkeeper and office manager.

The ups and downs of the housing market also have changed the nature of the jobs McKinney Well works on. These days, the company is doing fewer new installations and drilling fewer new wells, and focusing more on service and repairs.

“We do a lot of replacements where people didn't get the right thing, or it's just never worked, so we do a lot of ... upgrading things to make [them] work,” John said.

He sees service as the most important factor in maintaining customer satisfaction—especially because the company often gets business in this sector due to companies that do not provide adequate after-sale service. “In and around our area, there [are] a lot of people [who] are into sales [who] sell somebody something and they don't take care of it,” John explained. “Five years later, they're saying they've got to replace it. If the service is there behind what you sell, with pumps and filtration—that works.”

Well work these days comes mainly in the form of rehabilitating and replacing old wells. “The new drilling part of it is very competitive

around this area,” John said. “We've been pretty fortunate to be diversified enough that even when we get slow, [when it comes to] having to go out and drill, we don't have to push it. We can take it as it comes, and that's the way it is right now ... the guys are out doing whatever they have to do.”

## All in the Family

As the McKinney family story tells it, Chester became interested in the well drilling business while he was raising turkeys in Haverhill, Mass. At one point, he had to have a well drilled, and after seeing the process, he decided it was a good line of work to get into. “He just thought it was a good business venture, and on his part, he was a good businessman,” John said.

The area surrounding Haverhill was an ideal setting for a well drilling business, as it was, at the time, largely rural and without a municipal water supply. Although the business has since moved just across the Massachusetts border to Plaistow, the customer base today is similar—much of the area is rural, with no municipal water supply.

John knew that being part of the family business was always an option for him. “It was always something that was here and readily available,” he said. “My dad made it known.” He began working at McKinney Well

part time during high school, and as soon as he graduated, transitioned to full time.

From the start of John's tenure, McKinney Well has been a family affair. “We've had a few other people here or there involved, but a lot of it's been family,” he said. In addition to his father and grandfather, those family members included John's brother, Victor Jr., who was involved in the business until 1996, and his uncle, Bill Willey, who handled drilling operations.

Education also was a family affair, as most of John's education occurred on the job. “I never did have a chance to go to college or anything like that, so I kind of learned on the fly,” he said, adding that he learned the most about running the business from seeing his father do it over the years. Education on pumps and wells came primarily from his brother and uncle.



McKinney Well's staff is all family: John, wife Suzette, son Jake and cousin Mike

## GENERATIONS OF WATER

One of the most important lessons John learned was that being a dealer is not a 9-to-5 job. “People [might] call without water at any time, so to try to be readily available for people for service is important,” he said. “It boils down to the fact of being there for the customers when they call.” John has a business phone at his home—as does Jake—and his philosophy from day one was, “You answered the phone,” he said. “You answered the phone, you got [in] the car.”

### Technological Transitions

Over the years, John has seen many technological advances, but the ones that have had the greatest effect on the business have been on the well drilling side. The transition to pitless adapters was one game-changer: “Before [those] were available, all wells were buried, so that was a pretty big innovation at the time,” he said. The transition from jet pump systems to submersible pumps is another advancement he witnessed during his career. But the advances in drilling technology have had perhaps the biggest effect on the business. The most telling change is that, in the 1960s, McKinney Well had two drill rigs, but today it has just one. “We can’t be in two places, but we can do double what those [1960s drill rigs] ever thought of doing,” John said. “Nowadays, with the machinery we have, you’ll be working smarter, not harder.”

Another big change on the well drilling side is the relationships the company has with end users, especially when it comes to new construction. “In the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, there was a lot of involvement with the person [who] was actually going to be living in the house,” John said. “Even if there was a builder involved, you usually had contact with the owner or the person [who] was going to be buying the place to give [him or her] the opportunity to upgrade.”

But starting during the housing boom of the ‘90s, most communication regarding a well or treatment system at a new home has been with the builder, according to John. “A lot of builders don’t really push or give the opportunity to a lot of people to do anything” by way of upgrading their systems, he said—meaning that some homeowners only find out after they move in and are displeased with their water pressure or quality that other options were available. “If you could talk to the end user, it would be great,” John lamented. “In today’s day and age, it doesn’t work like that.”



Top: John’s grandfather Chester McKinney in the company truck  
Bottom: McKinney Well today, in Plaistow, N.H.

John’s tenure at McKinney Well also has seen the rise of computers and the Internet, which have helped advance the business, especially when it comes to marketing efforts. “Ever since the Internet evolved, we’ve been on there in some form or fashion, and that has played a big part,” he said. Although the company is not necessarily on the cutting edge of Internet technology, “it’s transpired into a lot of different inquiries.”

Victor also was keen on introducing new technologies to the business. “When my dad was in the business, the Yellow Pages [were] the biggest thing,” John said. “That’s really nothing anymore. The only people [who] are picking up a phone book are the prior generation.” But when fax machines came along, Victor was quick to incorporate one into his business operations. “He loved that,” John said. “We still have one in the office—not that we use it much.”

### A Positive Experience

Having seen so many changes over the years, it is no surprise that John’s favorite part of his job is the variety. Even if he is doing

the same thing—drilling a well, installing a pump, installing a filtration system—it’s “another location, another view, different customers. No job ever goes exactly the same,” he said.

The family aspect of the business also has been enjoyable for John, even though he admits that it does make some aspects of business more difficult, especially when it comes to making the “hard decisions.” But even if the person were a stranger, he said, the decision to let someone go, for example, “is never any easier.”

For the most part, however, being a part of a family business has been a positive experience for John, because it has meant spending more time with family. “My dad was pretty business-oriented, as far as he didn’t really have a lot of outside activities that he was involved in, so being able to be with him in the business ... was great,” John said. Today, that father-son time continues, now with John and Jake. “We do things together outside of the business, and we do work together, so it’s nice that way,” John said.

John has a grandson now, who he hopes could eventually become the fifth generation of the family to be a part of the business he and his forebears have built. “It’s kept this family going for quite a while,” he said.

# BUILDING ON THE PAST

**W**hen Ray Highberg started his dealership in LaCrosse, Wis., he was one of the first Culligan dealers in the country—and he probably did not imagine that one dealership would one day become a dynasty spanning four generations, with seven dealerships across four states.

That fourth generation is helmed by two of Highberg's great grandchildren, Troy and Kyle Macumber, who are keen on carrying on the legacy built by the previous generations.

## Slow Expansion

Troy credits the company's success to its periodic growth. The business began its decades-long expansion when Troy and Kyle's grandfather, Gordon Miller, who was working for Highberg, his father-in-law, decided to branch out on his own and buy the Culligan dealership in Marlette, Mich.

Gordon had three children—Peggy, David and Debby—and as the family business grew, the kids and their spouses all became involved. Troy and Kyle's parents, Peggy and David Macumber, and David and Carla Miller took on managerial roles at the Marlette location, while Debby and Jim Langolf bought Culligan of Port Huron, Mich., which they continue to run today.

Over the years, Gordon began to acquire more Culligan dealerships—first in Anderson, Ind., followed by Brighton, Colo.—through friends he had made over the years at industry events.

In 2011, the family bought Culligan of Flint, Mich. (although this has been “quite the catastrophe” lately, Troy noted that, at the time, acquiring the dealership was a no-brainer, as it was run similarly to the Marlette location) and in 2015 rounded out its portfolio by acquiring the Culligan dealership in Allegan, Mich.

## Love for the Business

Troy and Kyle both currently work together at the Marlette location, but each took his own path to the family business.

Troy started at the Marlette location in 2003 during a summer break from college for one main reason: His mom missed him. The previous summer, he had worked a 2 to 10 p.m. shift at a grocery store, while Peggy worked 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the dealership, meaning their paths rarely crossed.

“The following summer, when I was home from college, she said, ‘I would rather you work with us, so I can actually see you and spend time with you.’” Troy said. With that, he started riding along on salt delivery routes and later with service technicians, learning more about water treatment and conditioning as he went.

His newfound interest in water treatment helped him find new direction in college—he switched his major from computer science to business. After graduation, he began working full time in the Marlette dealership's service department, where he became well versed in the

technical side of water treatment. Today, he has transitioned to an office role and is gaining knowledge on the business side of the dealership.

Unlike Troy, Kyle knew he wanted to be a part of the family business from the start. “I couldn't wait to get started. It's in my blood, my soul—this business has been around forever,” Kyle said. “Troy [had] graduated college and had come back and started working already, so I saw my whole family in at Culligan. I went right into college in 2008 knowing exactly what I wanted to do.”

Throughout college, he worked at the dealership during summer breaks, helping with salt delivery routes and occasionally riding with Troy on service calls. After graduating with a degree in business management and marketing, he started working at the Marlette location full time.

Although both Troy and Kyle ultimately chose to be part of the family business, they say they never felt pressure from their parents to enter the water treatment industry.

“I knew I wanted to be part of it from the get-go, but never once was I asked to,” Kyle said. “More so I was told I didn't have to; I could explore other options if I wanted to—but I didn't want to.”

Troy felt that their parents actually put pressure on them in the opposite way. They advised him that “maybe you should try something [else] to make sure this is what you want to do,” Troy said. “We both opted that we both love the business.”

## Learning by Example

One reason Troy loves the water business is its intricacy. “There's just so much that goes into it, more than anyone even knows,” he said.

Each of the family members plays his or her own role in helping guide Troy and Kyle through those intricacies. “Everyone brings a different skill set to the table, so Kyle and I are trying to absorb a little of everyone,” Troy said. He explained that his father, Phil, is personable and technical—“he knows the ins and outs of every piece of equipment that Culligan puts out”—while his uncle, David, “one of the smartest people I know,” is business-savvy and detail oriented. Troy also described his mother as detail oriented and good with numbers, handling the dealership's payroll and taxes.

That focus on the details is one of the most important lessons Troy has learned from his family. “I'm not detail oriented, but I'm learning to become that way [and to] come at things from all different angles, take different stances on things, and try and see different perspectives,” he said. “Then you can get a good idea of what the big picture's going to look like, and it's easier to form your opinions that way.”

The primary value Kyle has learned from his family is the need to go “above and beyond” when it comes to the business—even if it means working extra hours or coming in on a Saturday. He has seen his family lead by example when it comes to doing more—observing that Troy and his father do not complain, even when they have to do something that is not convenient for them—and he intends to do the same in his career.

## The More Things Change ...

Even in the short time Kyle and Troy have been in the water industry, they have seen myriad changes, especially in water quality regulations and standards. New arsenic regulations have been especially pertinent to Culligan of Marlette, as its service area is plagued with high arsenic levels—an issue Troy says started getting “really hot” in the area in about 2008.

Troy has found being a Culligan franchisee valuable when it comes to these new regulations and emerging contaminants, and arsenic removal is a prime example. “[Culligan] offers pretty much everything we need, and if they don’t, they make a point to try and develop something that does work,” he said.

When arsenic first became a major issue, Culligan did not offer a system for its removal, so the Marlette franchise turned to AdEdge Water Technologies for arsenic removal media. But before long, Culligan developed its own arsenic removal system—using that same AdEdge media. “It’s kind of a nice thing that’s come full circle,” Troy said.

fit for each of them, and they have come to find it extremely rewarding.

“We get to work so closely with one another, and [these] people are my role models, so I get to be with them everyday and learn from them,” Kyle said. “It’s fun to watch it grow with your family.”

Troy echoed his sentiments. “It’s not something a lot of people have the fortune of doing, so I’m blessed in that way,” he said.

But he added that all of that togetherness has its pros and cons. One of Kyle’s favorite aspects of working with family is talking business at family gatherings, or while eating dinner together after a long day at a conference. That also means, however, that it can be hard to avoid talking about work when he would rather relax. In fact, Troy’s and Kyle’s grandmother eventually banned business talk at Christmas and other family get-togethers—and today, their mother also is “getting to that point.”

Another challenge is keeping things professional with family while at work. Kyle noted that if he and his father have a disagreement at home, “We can get in a screaming match and give each other a hug

“We get to work so closely with one another, and [these] people are my role models, so I get to be with them everyday and learn from them.”

Kyle added that Culligan also has been keen on keeping up with market trends, especially customers’ desire for efficient, green technologies. “I think Culligan caught onto that really well, making an efficient unit and calling it the High Efficiency softener,” he said. “You plug that name ... with some customers and you have their attention.”

Getting customers’ attention is another area in which the dealership has experienced changing attitudes and technologies. While chatting about advertising last year at the WQA Aquatech USA trade show in Las Vegas, Troy said his grandfather was “blown away” when he found out the dealership no longer does much advertising in the phone book. “That’s what he always knew ... that you put full-page ads or half-page ads in the Yellow Pages, and that’s how people found you,” Troy said. Due to the prevalence of the Internet, however, the dealership now spends more on advertising on search engines like Google than in phone books.

Not everything has changed when it comes to advertising, though—the Marlette dealership, as well as most of the family’s other dealerships, still advertise with inserts in the newspaper. “We live in an older farming community where they still read the newspaper,” Troy said, adding that, “not everything’s going all technological in our areas.”

Getting the attention of potential employees is another area in which the dealership has not turned to technology. Because most of the dealerships are located in small towns, word-of-mouth is the primary way it finds new hires. “We’ve gotten lucky that way—that we’ve had a lot of referrals from current employees [who] spoke highly of someone [and] it’s worked out that they’ve been the right fit for the job,” Troy said.

## The Pros & Cons of Family

Troy and Kyle both have found that working in a family business is the right

afterward,” he said. “At work, I have to remember he is my superior in this building.”

## From Foundation to Future

Troy and Kyle take these few negative aspects in stride, and both have great pride in the business their family has built.

At conferences, Kyle enjoys being able to tell other dealers he is fourth generation. “Not a lot of people can say that, and it makes us really proud to be able to say that,” he said. “It’s something we really value.”

Industry conferences and events also give Troy and Kyle the opportunity to connect with other dealers around their age—many of whom also come from multi-generational family businesses. “To have people our age getting involved in the business, and to grow up with them in the business as well, just like my uncle did, my dad did, my grandpa did—it’s a rewarding and cool experience, and I don’t think there are a lot of industries that can do that,” Troy said.

Kyle also looks toward the future as he builds relationships with others in his generation. “That’s exciting, because we see their dads as presidents of this and board members of that, and we’re going to get to that point someday. That’s fun to see,” he said.

Thoughts of the future, and building on the foundation their forebears started keep Troy and Kyle motivated. Troy said he hopes to be able to carry on the legacy his family started and “hopefully pass it on to my children, if they’re interested,” he said.

Kyle feels the same. When he looks at the past, and how much the family business has grown, “I get excited looking to the future, thinking, ‘What else can Troy and I do?’” he said. “How much better can it get? ... I’m excited to see how it will.”

# FROM SUITS TO SALT

**A**bendroth Water Conditioning in Fort Atkinson, Wis., got its unofficial start in 1950, when Renville “Pat” Abendroth began selling softeners part time at the suggestion of one of his band mates in the Shriners band. He quickly discovered that many consumers would rather rent than buy, so he began working with the Lindsay Co. (now EcoWater), which offered a softener rental program.

In 1953, he decided to focus on water treatment full time and incorporated Abendroth Water Conditioning, initially working out of his basement.

The business quickly outgrew the basement, so Pat moved it to the shared duplex garage, where he had about as much space as a single-car garage. Soon he needed even more space, so when he saw an ad in the newspaper for a home for sale with a three-car garage that had previously been a veterinary clinic—meaning the garage had running water—he quickly bought it up.

Before long, the business became too big to operate out of his home, so Pat moved it to an offsite office. When he came across an ad for a building for sale in 1967, he knew it was the place for Abendroth Water Conditioning: A railroad spur led right to side of it, so salt deliveries by rail would be a cinch.

The dealership is still headquartered in that building today, and is now helmed by third-generation president Vincent Kent, who took over from his father-in-law, Curtis Abendroth.

## Similar Starts

Passing Abendroth Water Conditioning from generation to generation has not always been a given—and although they joined the business nearly 40 years apart, Curtis’ and Vincent’s stories are remarkably similar.

In the early 1960s, Curtis was working in Chicago and getting ready to marry his wife, Diane. He was about to transfer to a new job as general manager of a business in Milwaukee, complete with a raise. But when Pat heard about the new job, he made Curtis an offer he certainly could have refused: Move to Fort Atkinson and take a decrease in pay to work with his father.

Curtis’ lifelong philosophy is that “the grass is always greener on the

other side of the fence, but sometimes it’s harder to chew.” So after some thought he took his father up on the offer—after all, he said, “Fort Atkinson has really been a wonderful community to grow up in.” In 1964, he and Diane moved back and became part of the family business.

Vincent also was living the big city life when the water industry came knocking: He was working in the hotel and hospitality industry in Baltimore. In May 1994, Curtis called a family meeting, inviting Vincent and Linda, his daughter, and Brian, his son, to meet him in Toledo, Ohio, where Brian lived at the time, to discuss the future of the business. Curtis told his children, “Ask any question you want and we’ll answer it truthfully.”

Brian and his wife decided a move and career change were not the right

choices for their family at the time, but Vincent and Linda saw lots of positives in the opportunity: It would allow them to live in one place—“in the hotel business, you kind of moved a lot,” Vincent said—and be closer to Vincent’s family in Chicago. Plus, Vincent said, he likes “tinkering and working with my hands.” The couple agreed to try it for three years—and more than 20 years later, they are still there.



Curtis and Diane Abendroth and Linda and Vincent Kent with their staff

## Starting at the Bottom

Transitioning to the water industry after 12 years in the hotel business was no easy feat for Vincent. The transi-

tion started before he and Linda even moved to Wisconsin—Curtis had immediately signed Vincent up for the Water Quality Assn.’s (WQA) Certified Water Specialist program, and the textbooks arrived while they were still living in Baltimore. “I remember opening them up and going, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’” Vincent said. “Talking about ions and valences and positive charge and negative charge and ferrous and ferric iron—I thought, holy cow, I’m going to have to go back to high school to remember all this.”

But Vincent studied hard and passed his test. Unfortunately, even though he now knew the science of water treatment, he lacked real-world experience. “It’s not until you have on-the-job training and you go out into basements and farmhouses and milking parlors and high rises and hotels and boiler rooms and cooling towers that you truly understand what has to happen, and that not everything in the book is what it’s supposed to be,” he said.

Fortunately, Curtis had a solution: Vincent should start at the bottom. “I went from being a senior sales manager in an executive

position to a delivery person delivering salt," Vincent said. However, the strategy paid off. "I started ... putting salt in the units and discovering problems while I was there and trying to troubleshoot the problem," he said. "That gave me the knowledge of what salt did to a water softener and how it operated in the real world." (Not to mention the physical benefits: "In all the years I've known [Vincent], I don't think he's been in better shape than he was" when he was delivering salt, Curtis said.)

From the delivery route to the shop to the office, Vincent continued to learn and work his way up. "Little by little he took over, and then it got to the point where employees were saying, 'Well, who do we talk to? Do we talk to Vince or do we talk to Curtis if we've got a problem?'" Curtis said. "You can't have two people [in charge], so I made the decision that it was time for me to get out. People said I couldn't do it, but I did!"

Since then, Vincent has continued to grow the business and advocate for the industry, including serving a term as WQA president in 2009-2010. "Is everything done the same as I would have done? No, it isn't," Curtis said. "On the other hand, in many cases, it's done better. Just because it's different doesn't make it wrong."

Today the dealership has 14 employees operating out of one location that covers a more-than-50-mile radius, with Vincent as president and Linda as general manager and treasurer. Business is divided evenly between residential and commercial/industrial work, the latter of which Vincent especially enjoys and has worked to build the company's reputation in. "I have learned over the years that many water treatment dealers are afraid of the commercial/industrial side, whereas we really thrive to go after that kind of business," he said.

### Small Business Benefits

Vincent has realized many benefits working in a small family business, but for him, the No. 1 benefit is the flexibility. "The ability to still make it to your kids' games on time, the ability to be involved in a local school, the ability to be involved in your community—[that is] something that is missing in America today," he said. He believes this aspect of small business encourages people to work harder. "You really have each other's backs all the time," he said, explaining that when he is facing challenges, his employees are "willing to step up" and vice versa.

For Vincent, the biggest challenge of working in a family business has been keeping work life and home life separate—a nearly impossible task for a business that offers 24/7 service, with after-hours service

calls forwarded to Vincent's phone. "A lot of times when you walk out the door at the end of the day, the challenges you had don't remain behind," he said. "You can't ... just close the door, because it is who you are, whether you're out in the community, whether you're at home, whether you're at your kid's basketball game—it is with you all the time."

Curtis also found balancing work and home to be a challenge when Diane became involved in the business. The couple had to make a conscious effort on that front: "At work we talked work," Curtis said. "We did not talk about family problems or children or anything like that."

### Future of the Business

Despite the ups and downs of the economy and regulatory changes within the water industry, Abendroth Water Conditioning has grown every year. "We haven't grown at the same rate every year, but we've

not experienced bad years—we've not had to lay off staff, we've not had to cut benefits and cut employee opportunities," Vincent said.

He credits that success to the high level of service the company provides—a philosophy that started with Pat and has been passed through the generations. "My experience in the hotel and hospitality industry mixed right into what their beliefs already were, and that was [that] the only way we will grow will be with unparalleled service," Vincent said.

He continues to live that philosophy each day, and is keen to point out that even though his title at the company is "president," he still interacts

with customers every day—in fact, it is one of his favorite parts of the job. "I'm still out there each and every day, willing to go into the customer's house, bid the job, carry their salt in, service their equipment, get my hands dirty, work right alongside my guys," he said.

Vincent also credits ethics and loyalty to vendors as values that have helped the business succeed for more than 60 years. He is positive the business will see success in the future. "Our industry is recession proof," he said. "If you take water away and it's all gone, every living thing is gone." He predicts that eventually municipalities will only treat water to the point that homes will still need final barrier treatment in the form of point-of-use or point-of-entry systems—meaning water treatment dealers will play a bigger role for the public than ever. "The opportunity's only going to get bigger." **WQP**

*Kate Cline is managing editor of WQP. Cline can be reached at [kcline@sgcmail.com](mailto:kcline@sgcmail.com) or 847.391.1007.*



Gus Brokmeier, Curtis Abendroth and Pat Abendroth with the company van in the 1960s