

By Sara Samovalov

The Science of Success

Two science experts apply technical knowledge at Maine dealership

Water treatment may not be rocket science, but a water treatment company can certainly benefit from having a rocket scientist at the helm. Just ask Mike Gelberg, president of Air & Water Quality Inc. in Maine.

Gelberg studied aeronautics and astronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and fluid, thermal and aerospace sciences at Case Western Reserve University; worked on the Apollo and Skylab space programs; and helped found a pioneering computer company before entering the water treatment industry.

He was attending a seminar on radon mitigation at a Maine community college in 1989 when he struck up a conversation with Jeff Twitchell, a high school science teacher and home remodeler. Not long afterward, Air & Water Quality was born.

The company initially focused on radon mitigation systems. As waterborne radon treatment became a larger part of the business, Gelberg and Twitchell began to pretreat clients' water for minerals that could foul radon reduction systems. Neither had formal training in water treatment, but their technical backgrounds "made the learning process much easier and quicker," Gelberg said.

It was hard going at first. The economy was in decline and the real estate market was suffering. Gelberg and Twitchell could not afford to pay themselves a salary for two years. But they took advantage of the downtime: "Many hours were spent educating homeowners, home inspectors and real estate agents about the need for testing and the means of treatment for radon and water quality issues," Gelberg said.

Eventually, the economy and real estate market rebounded. Today, Air & Water Quality is Maine's largest water treatment dealership, with locations in Freeport and Ellsworth. The company, which supplies Kinetico products, has 27 full-time employees and approximately 16,000 customers.

Local Water Concerns

Gelberg and Twitchell have their work cut out for them treating Maine's water. About half of Maine's residents draw their water from private wells, which often have high levels of iron, manganese and calcium carbonate. Many homes are built along the ocean, so wells also may suffer from seawater intrusion. Lastly, Maine wells "have some of the highest concentrations of arsenic and uranium found anywhere in the United States," Gelberg said.

The company serves about 90% residential customers. "There are a lot of people [who] live here and have second homes. We do a lot of work in those, especially along the coastal areas and in the inland lake areas," Gelberg said.



With backgrounds in science, Gelberg (top) and Twitchell (bottom) learned water treatment quickly. Today, the company serves mainly residential customers in Maine.



"We do a lot of coastal work. We do a lot of island work. I've actually got a boat and I often will transport equipment and the guys over to an island that's maybe not as easy to get to. It's not a major part of our business, but we've started doing more and more of the island work."

Air & Water Quality's marketplace has expanded as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has made standards for arsenic and uranium in drinking water stricter. While there is no federal standard for radon, the state of Maine implemented its own standard of 4,000 pCi/L, and Air & Water Quality has treated water with radon levels of more than 2 million pCi/L.

Maine residents without private wells rely on public water supplies. The largest of these draws from Lake Sebago, the state's deepest lake. Its water "is quite good, unfortunately," Gelberg said. "It's very, very low in minerals as far as hardness." Nevertheless, he hopes to see the company expand into treating other public water supplies, as well as into the commercial sector.

Spreading the Word

Maintaining a good reputation is of utmost importance in a sparsely populated state like Maine, where just more than 1 million people live on 35,000 sq miles of land. Having two offices enables Air & Water Quality to service nearly the entire state.

While the company relies mainly on referrals to attract new customers, it also uses Facebook, Twitter and local cable television advertisements for marketing. Home shows are another means of spreading the word.

"[Air & Water Quality's] mission statement is quite basic: 'Dedicate the business to creating satisfied customers,'" Gelberg said. "It sounds like a

simple idea, but the implementation involves a significant effort and focus. Our dedication to creating satisfied customers is not just a bunch of words—it's what we do. That's why we've been successful."

Air & Water Quality's custom-designed internal database, which Gelberg estimates has at least 80,000 entries, is an additional means of generating referrals.

"Everybody that calls gets into the database," Gelberg said. "Nothing might happen today, but five years from now, you can look up that address in the database and [say], 'I think we talked to you or the previous owner back in 1998.' If we went out there to do a test of the water, we [enter] the test results there; any test they purchased through us ... we keep all that information in our database."

Emphasizing Education

Employees are central to Air & Water Quality's ability to win new customers and retain existing ones. The company takes particular interest in its employees' education because "knowledge is extremely important. It goes right down through all of our employees: administrators, techs, salespeople, managers—we want everybody to know as much as they can about water quality, water testing and treatment," Gelberg said. "Many hours are spent

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in a teaching environment in the [Air & Water Quality] office. Education sessions are held every week."

Air & Water Quality's emphasis on education extends to its website, which provides information on topics like well chlorination, servicing equipment and water testing. Twitchell—who was an instructor for EPA radon programs at Rutgers University, and co-authored an EPA radon course—wrote a book on water treatment basics, which the company published internally for its own use and hands out to new customers.

Not Slowing Down

At age 71, Gelberg still goes into Air & Water Quality's office "sometimes seven days a week," he said.

He predicts that—like him—the water treatment industry will not slow down any time soon. "Water is a resource that's in high demand, and there's not much of it," he said. "It's a precious commodity. The whole environmental area is just wide open and is expanding." **WQP**

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