

Alklean Industries, Inc.

Pasadena, Texas

It's not often a chance meeting with a stranger eventually leads to a life-changing career decision that continues to prove successful 31 years later. Yet, in 1967, that scenario presented itself to John and Brenda Purswell. Recalls John, "I saw him going up the stairs at a motel in Sierra Vista, Arizona. He was wearing a ten-gallon Stetson. I yelled, 'Hello Tex,' and he yelled, 'Hey Tex' back. We struck up a conversation and over the next several years kept in touch." That was the beginning of their friendship with Carroll and Faybress Smith of CL Smith Company in Paris, Texas.

In November 1971, Carroll, a regional representative for Citation of Siloam Springs, Arkansas, urged John and Brenda to begin a distributorship. John had recently left the military and was working for an oil company. Since extra income was needed to pay some large medical bills, they decided to start distributing pressure washers part time. Recounts John, "After a slow start, in 18 months, we were making more money doing this than I was full time at my regular job. We don't claim to be rocket scientists, but we could clearly hear opportunity knocking. In January 1973, I quit the secure eight to five job to pursue a career in business full time."

John and Brenda have always been dreamers. The freedom to control their own destiny and the prospect of creating a comfortable lifestyle for themselves and their family has always been attractive to them. They have achieved their dreams. Hard work and their philosophy, "We sweat the big stuff because there is no small stuff," has enabled them to build Alklean Industries, Inc. into a successful distributorship.

These east Texas natives grew up in a rural community. John had worked in electronics and then operated heavy equipment for several years. The latter work provided him with the knowledge necessary to speak that language when he started calling on construction companies and heavy equipment distributors. An added benefit when entering the pressure cleaning industry was his work in instrumentation.

Brenda began her professional career doing general office work for several different companies. "She was a



The Alklean team serves a trade area of approximately a 150-mile radius of downtown Houston. Photos courtesy of Alklean Industries, Inc.

natural in picking up the business end of things when we started Alklean," remarks John. "She had an exceptional aptitude for learning equipment sales and worked hard to develop her talents in that area. She is a tough manager, an exceptional sales person, and handles most of the thankless jobs. I could not have wished for a partner whose talents would better complement my own." Then John quickly and jokingly adds, "Of course, since Brenda grew up on a farm where she operated farm machinery and baled hay from the time she was a pre-teen, just marrying me offered a more exciting life—how else do you think I made such a great catch?"

The Early Days

In 1971, the pressure washer business was still in its infancy, so the Purswells have literally grown up with the industry. "It was new technology when we started, and our greatest challenge to selling hot water pressure washers was to get the customer to try one," explains John. "We did not know 'come here from sic em' about business. It was similar to the dot.coms of a few years ago. Fortunately, a growing market will allow you to afford a lot of mistakes, and we made our share."

They started their business in a one-car garage with a closed-in patio serving as a parts room. With a new pickup truck, two machines in the garage, and 100 lbs. of

detergent, it took three months to sell the first machine. "I have to tell you, we were having reservations," remarks John. "There were some anxious moments with a truck to pay for and two machines sitting there." It took three months to sell the first one, but then the second one was sold three days later. They were on their way to achieving their dream.

Dreams Can Come True

The days of a makeshift operation are long gone. Today, they have over 10,000 sq. ft. in three buildings, in addition to another 3750 sq. ft. building they have signed a contract to purchase. The additional square footage will be a warehouse and air-conditioned repair facilities (a must when you live in south Texas). A previous addition



Alklean offers a diversified line of products to meet customers' needs.

provided space for an air-conditioned showroom and sales office. Alklean's offices share a computer network with 11 workstations.

In addition to John, who is the company's CEO, and Brenda, who serves as president, four full-time sales people, four full-time service people, one parts person, two support personnel, and a part-time computer systems' maintenance person round out the Alklean team. "We count our staff as one of our greatest blessings," says John. "On average, our employees have been with us over ten years. Good people are a treasure that you build in human capital. Without them, our achievements would be impossible. They take pride in being the best."

To that end, the Purswells spend a great deal of time on training. Conducting sales training and service training weekly can be difficult to achieve because it requires much preparation, explains John, "but, if you don't prepare for your training sessions, you end up with a bull and bellyache session. You must make an outline and adhere to it, or you won't accomplish much."

Brenda adds that she believes the training to be their company's greatest strength: "We are committed to a code of personal and business ethics that require us to be fair and truthful to our customers, our vendors, and our employees."

"All of our employees are like family to us," says John, "but one employee in whom Brenda and I take special satisfaction is our son, John Jr." By age ten, he could be seen in the shop sweeping the floors or emptying the trash. Over the years, he progressed to the service department and then on to sales. Following college graduation with two degrees in business, he has become not only their right arm in helping manage the business but their heir apparent. With pride in his voice, John senior says, "Having been able to start our son in the industry is like having had another lifetime to be able to spend with him."

Markets/Products

Alklean primarily serves a commercial and industrial market; the EPA and big box stores have taken away the bulk of their light commercial and consumer business in the Houston market. Hotsy, Mi-T-M, Whitco, Kew, Hydro Tek, Epps, Zurn, PSC, Sioux, and Hydro-Blast provide the company's product lines. In addition to pressure washers, the distributorship carries cabinet parts washers, water reclaim equipment, water



treatment chemicals, industrial cleaning products, floor trenching equipment, and a full line of janitorial products

"We are not aware of any manufacturer that covers the entire spectrum of products our market requires," explains John, "but since each manufacturer has lines in which they excel, offering merchandise from a number of manufacturers allows us to provide items well-suited and positioned to perform well in most applications within our markets."

The growth sector of their business has shifted over the years. "It is certain that we have a mature pressure washer market in our area," shares John. "It changes with the economy, so that is why we have diversified our product offerings. If one product is not moving, we try another."

They have found accessories vital to success. "It is much easier and more profitable to market additional items to a customer you already have than seek a new one," explains Brenda.

Continued on Page 34

As for service departments, John divides them into two categories: "They are either a profit center or a liability. If it is a liability, a soft market can sink you. If it is a profit center, your service department can save your bacon in a soft market." It may be a never-ending struggle, but Alklean's service department definitely serves as a solid profit center.

The distributorship strives to be "members" of the 30% club—where chemical sales are 30% or more of gross sales. They have found this goal challenging, with their best efforts at the moment reaching the upper 20's. Today, they represent several manufacturers who supply cleaning products. "Hotsy's diverse line has allowed us to seek some specialty markets with solid products that are already tested and proven, so we look for that segment to continue to grow," explains John. However, because they have blended their own detergent for many years and have long-term customers who are happy with their products, it did not make any sense to attempt to switch them to a different product when some of the lines they now carry became available. Therefore, the largest percentage of their detergents is still blended in-house from raw materials.

"There is definitely an economic advantage to blending your own. Since we grew up with the industry, we were able to comply with each regulation as it was introduced. There weren't even MSDSs when we started. We learned one rule and then other," explains John. "We do all of the training any other chemical manufacturer does. Today, many distributors have such a hectic life that many of them don't want to blend their own chemicals, so drum in a box is a good bet."

Brenda and John agree that if a distributor does decide to blend his own, he must know his municipality's

regulations regarding blending. "Blending detergent generates some wastewater and being able to discharge those residues can be critical from an expense standpoint. If we were one block to the east, the regulations would be much more stringent. A great deal depends on the municipality's ability to process your wastewater. Even though it is just detergent, if your municipality cannot handle the waste stream, your costs can rise dramatically," says John.

Past, Present, and Future

"I could really write an entire article about what has changed since the early years. For sure, when we started, Brenda was just a child and the Big Dipper was just a cup," quips John. "When Alklean was in its infancy, you could get into business with a pair of boots and a pick up truck. Marketing was show and tell. We didn't need a shop because you could carry the parts to fix just about anything on your truck. There were four pump models and two kits."

"Citation had a total of four models," recalls Brenda. "The smallest unit was a steamer; the largest a two-horsepower hot water washer." In those early years, items such as trigger guns, unloaders, auto start/stop, remote stations, and multi-gun systems had not been invented. John recalls that even "when the first trigger guns and unloaders were developed, they were nightmares because at 1000 psi nothing was available to stand up to those *awful* pressures."

In today's mature industry, they agree that starting a distributorship is much more difficult. The distributor customer base is shrinking—not the pressure washer market. The bottom half of Alklean's customer base from ten years ago has either switched supply channels, or the EPA has stopped them from cleaning altogether.

As for the industry's future, they believe that there will be continued consolidation in the industry. Alklean has already bought out some distributors who elected to leave the

industry, retire, or return to employment status. "We are a graying industry, and many of the major players will retire in the next ten years. Some distributors will be bought out, some will fail, and some will be liquidated for lack of a qualified buyer or a viable succession plan," concedes John. "I believe that distributorships are still a viable and vital part of the business community. However, the pressure washer distributor of tomorrow will be vastly different from those of years gone by. A lot of distributors are doing nothing to comply with the DOT laws that are already on the books. One accident can wipe out a lifetime's work if you are not in compliance. Some will take the training and grow; others will elect to call it quits and leave the business."

Brenda adds, "Fortunately for some, there are a number of second-generation owners who are distributors and there will be more, but I agree with John that more will be leaving one way or another than new distributorships opening. However, I do believe the distributors who are left will be better educated and more business oriented."

"I do think most of the second-generation owners are better educated and are starting a light year ahead of where we came from," notes John.

Wise Counsel

The Purswells admit that for many years they struggled as they chased equipment sales. While they believe that this is still a vital part of any growing distributorship, they have sought to develop other revenue streams to ensure their survival during economic downturns. "We have worked hard at diversifying our product offerings since, during our years in the industry, we have not only ridden to the top when pressure washers were selling well but experienced the free fall of a soft market when recession hit and capital spending was put on hold by most companies traded on Wall Street," John explains.

To be successful today, the Purswells believe that distributors

must use their applications' expertise and ability to educate the customer as their primary sales' tools. "The product mix varies with geographic location, the distributor's background information, and opportunities," says John. "Most fourth graders can work the math to cut prices. It is a pity that when distributors were learning which buttons to push so they could cut the price, they did not learn which ones to push to determine their cost of doing business. Show me a distributor who got wealthy selling pressure washers cheap, and I will show you a hundred who went broke selling too cheap."

To achieve their dream, the Purswells have done more than just advertise in the *Yellow Pages*, work trade shows, send out mass media advertising, and develop a website to serve their normal trade area of approximately a 150-mile radius of downtown Houston. They have realized that none of these tools can replace the value of sales person generated leads and referrals. Referrals only occur

when quality products and service are offered, so John and Brenda are constantly seeking ways to remain knowledgeable about every facet of their markets. They have attended numerous seminars presented by CETA and various manufacturers. John and Brenda have both served on the CETA board, and Alklean Industries holds Certificate 001 for being the first CETA Certified Distributor.

They believe their involvement with the association has greatly benefited their business. "As far as I'm concerned, the importance of our relationship with CETA is almost impossible to measure. I believe our business value has almost doubled since we became active in the association," states John emphatically. "At the conventions, we may not pick up a new product each time, but we always learn something from the different seminars or from just sitting and sharing ideas with other distributors. We may give away a few of our ideas, but we always feel that we gain more than we give."

Brenda echoes John's enthusiasm: "Because consolidation is not just occurring among manufacturers, but distributors as well, I firmly believe that in order to stay profitable, we are going to have to continue to be more and more educated. That is why I am excited about the addition of regional CETA meetings. We have used the national meeting as a management tool for us; the regional meetings will be a technical tool to train our sales and service people."

They have no regrets as they look back over the last 31 years. From the moment that second Citation machine was sold, "To a dreamer it was like hitting the jackpot. We were hooked, and we are still at it," exclaims Brenda.

John agrees, "It has sure had it ups and downs, but over all, the pressure washer industry has been good to us. If I were starting over at 25 again, and I knew what we have learned from all of our business experiences, those benefits would make me select a career in business again." 🐾