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SPECIAL REPORT



Stewart Vernon & Stanley Steemer

By Erin Ansley | 11.11.2011

Four years ago, Stewart Vernon hired the national franchise Stanley Steemer to perform a water extraction, but decided at the last-minute to add another service to the job order. The technician didn't even blink.

"Without having to call the franchise office, without having to look anything up, he was able to pull out his information, quote me exactly what it cost, tell me how long it would take, and then process the payment right there," says Vernon, who founded Macon, Ga.-based America's Swimming Pool Co. in 2001.

This personal experience altered the way he viewed the pricing structure for his own swimming pool service, maintenance and remodeling franchise, and contributed to the philosophical concept of the flat-rate system it eventually adopted. In doing so, he has allowed the employees to facilitate or control some of the work that previously the franchise owners had to do, Vernon explains. "Now, if we're out to install a pump and the homeowner asks us to change the sand in the filter, we're able to tell them exactly what price that will be and how long it will take, and collect payment based on that."

His customers have welcomed these pricing guidelines with open arms. Instead of paying for time, materials, parts and sales tax, they pay one rate for the job, materials and sales tax. It's a concept people are more familiar with, and as a result, Vernon says it's easier to sell jobs.

The proof is in the numbers. Implementing service-minded theories like a pricing structure has helped ASP grow in just under 11 years to include 72 locations and nearly 150 employees in seven states.

"Our gross profit margin is higher on jobs now than it was pre-flat rate, and at the end of the day, that is what's most important in any business," he adds.

While studying the business models of companies like Stanley Steemer, Vernon also has learned that consistency — whether with pricing, marketing or staffing — is another way to keep customers satisfied. He noticed Stanley Steemer had clean trucks that all looked the same and proudly displayed the company logo.

There's a toll-free number (sung in the company's jingle) that is easy to recall. All technicians receive rigorous training, go through an extensive background screening and drug test, and are bonded. The Website is clean and informative, and matches the direct mailing pieces sent to current and potential customers.

All of this, says Brian King, vice president of marketing for Stanley Steemer, has allowed the 64-year-old, family-owned franchise to expand to more than 70 branches and 240-plus locations in the United States alone. Customers find comfort in the uniform message and know that, no matter where they live, they will get the same level of service from any Stanley Steemer location. "If we didn't have a consistent brand image, that would be diluted and we'd be the same as everybody else," King says.

Customer retention is especially significant in the service sector, Vernon says. He recognized early on that he had to implement programs that would elevate ASP above the competition. To ensure quality



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- 1 Stanley Steemer founder Jack Bates almost named the company Jack Rabbit Cleaning.
- 2 The company's yellow and black colors are those of Upper Arlington High School — where Bates' son and grandson received their educations.
- 3 In 2000, Stanley Steemer launched its first national network television advertising campaign, becoming the first carpet-cleaning company in America to do so.
- 4 The first prototype of a steam-cleaning machine, the Stanley 1, was developed in 1970.

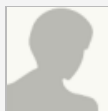
work, he offers pool school training for franchise owners and managers. Morale stays high thanks to incentive programs, and he maintains a positive image with clean, reliable trucks and a useful Website. Plus, he sends out regular direct marketing pieces, even during the worst of economic times.

These efforts have paid off, Vernon says. In the last two years, year-over-year company-wide sales increased 35 and 50 percent, respectively. And this September is the strongest he's witnessed to date. All told, renovation requests are up, and call volume is much higher than in the past, according to Vernon.

"Looking back over 11 years, we couldn't have gotten to this point without taking some well thought-out, calculated risks," he reflects. "I know it's hard to innovate and make change, but without it, you won't stand to grow."

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