

SMALL-BUSINESS PROFILE

Custodial supplier among largest in Midwest

Kalamazoo company builds on longstanding success by teaching, helping clients

BY KELLE BARR
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

KALAMAZOO — Fred Martin opened the doors of KSS Enterprises in 1945.

The Hill family purchased the small cleaning supply store in downtown Kalamazoo in 1987 and has expanded it to six locations with 73 employees, making KSS Enterprises one of the largest sanitary supply companies in the Midwest.

The company counts more than 5,000 customers in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio.

"My family has always been in the cleaning business," said company president Tom Hill, 51, referring to his father and grandfather before him. "I grew up going to work with my dad on Saturdays just to hang out with him and help in his warehouse."

Tom's wife, Pat Hill, handles KSS corporate relations, and his sister, Terry Dawson, is the company's vice president.

Evolving with the times

Although KSS operates under old-school work ethics and

business strategies, the company has evolved considerably with the times to keep up with the needs of clients — including the current call for trimming expenses.

"We don't just sell to our clients. We help them," Tom said. "We hold training expos for our customers to teach their employees and help them save money."

KSS provides this education at multiple custodial expos throughout the year, in addition to advising and training clients individually as needed. As a result, some of them — schools, medical facilities, offices and property management firms among them — have in-house staffers who are skilled in procedures, compliance, equipment use and more.

10 percent on the Net

Internet orders now make up 10 percent of business. E-mail blasts are a significant marketing tool, and social networking soon will follow. While economics have forced some firms to cut staff or close doors, KSS continues to grow and recently opened its sixth location in Detroit.

This success, according to the owners and Ed Stasiak, vice president of sales and operations, boils down to competitive costs and superior service. KSS team members are taught to deliver stellar customer service, from sales consultants to



SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE/JOHN A. LACKO

Third generation: Ed Stasiak, Pat Hill, Tom Hill and Terry Dawson, executives with KSS Enterprises, stand in the Kalamazoo company's Vine Street showroom.

account coordinators to accounting personnel to warehouse assistants and delivery drivers.

"We hold every employee to a high level of accountability," Tom Hill said. "We are constantly mentoring them and coaching them in excellence."

The resulting account retention has paid off, with KSS servicing some clients that were handed down from the Hills' father, Tom Hill Sr., and their grandfather before him.

This valuable preservation extends to the KSS personnel in an organization where executives treat employees with the same principles as their patrons.

"One third of our work force has been with us for over 20 years," Stasiak said. "We're not just selling commodities here — it's about treating people the right way."

we also love the car and thoroughly enjoy embedding it beneath our fingernails. Whereas some children's growth is measured by hashmarks on a doorjamb, my family moved too often for that. Instead, I am measured, from toddler to teenager, in my grandfather's garden — first in Traverse City, then in Huntington, Ind. — chomping on a choice piece of sweet corn wrested from the stalk.

Both of us had three children, in roughly the same spread of ages, starting with a girl and ending with a girl. I deviated from his plan by substituting a male for the middle child, but I believe that injection of testosterone only altered the household volume and dynamic slightly.

Which is why it concerns me that he is nearing the end of his journey with unfinished business regarding his family.

gassed up the Caddy. When I needed someone to walk me down the aisle, he donned a tie.

He's our go-to guy, and if he decides to go somewhere else, I don't know what we'll do.

It might not be the most mature strategy to keep a loved one longer than you deserve them, but I have come to the conclusion that I can keep my grandfather for at least another 15 years simply by not completing several home projects. I know this man's character, and he will not leave until the job is done.

And I'm counting on that work ethic. So if you come to visit the Beekes, watch that first step.

B. Candace Beeke, editor of *Business Review West Michigan*, writes a weekly column for the *Kalamazoo Gazette*. Contact her at candaceb@mbusinessreview.com.

FACT SHEET

KSS Enterprises

What: 65-year-old distributor of cleaning supplies and equipment, including laundry and restaurant products. KSS also services and repairs cleaning equipment.

Where: Headquarters is at 616 E. Vine St. in Kalamazoo. Five other locations are in Michigan and Indiana.

Contact: Call 269-349-6637 or visit www.kssenterprises.com.