

Longterm focus creates a thriving business

Waterway owes its longevity to an emphasis on people.

BY ROBYN TUCKER | MANAGING EDITOR

Waterway Gas & Wash has come a long way since it opened its first exterior-only wash with gas in 1970. At this inaugural St. Louis location, every customer received a free carwash with a fill-up. Now all Waterway sites are full-service with fueling stations and c-stores, and some offer ride-thru options as well.

Waterway chairman Henry Dubinsky and a small group of friends founded the company. He was a 29-year-old lawyer and CPA. Two of the company's senior members, Karen Patton and Ken Williams, have been with the business since it started.



'In it for the long haul'

Many carwashes are turning to express exterior formats, but Waterway is sticking with the full-serve option as its main focus.

"We are true believers in the full-service segment of the business," says Waterway CEO Bob Dubinsky. "We like our core concept of traditional full-service with [a] gas and c-store [offering], and [we] plan to stick with it."

According to Dubinsky, the challenge of maintaining a profitable full-serve wash is part of the appeal.

"This full-service focus seems to be at odds with the current industry trend," Dubinsky adds. "We like full-service because it is very hard to do well and because it is so people intensive, not in spite of these factors."

Waterway encourages an entrepreneurial spirit among its team members. Its people and special culture are what make it unique, believes Dubinsky. They are also how the company plans to stay around for another 50 years.

"We are in it for the long haul," shares Dubinsky. "Our 50th anniversary is only a few years away, and we are doing what we can to last another 50. In particular, our substantial investment in people and facilities reflects a longterm commitment."

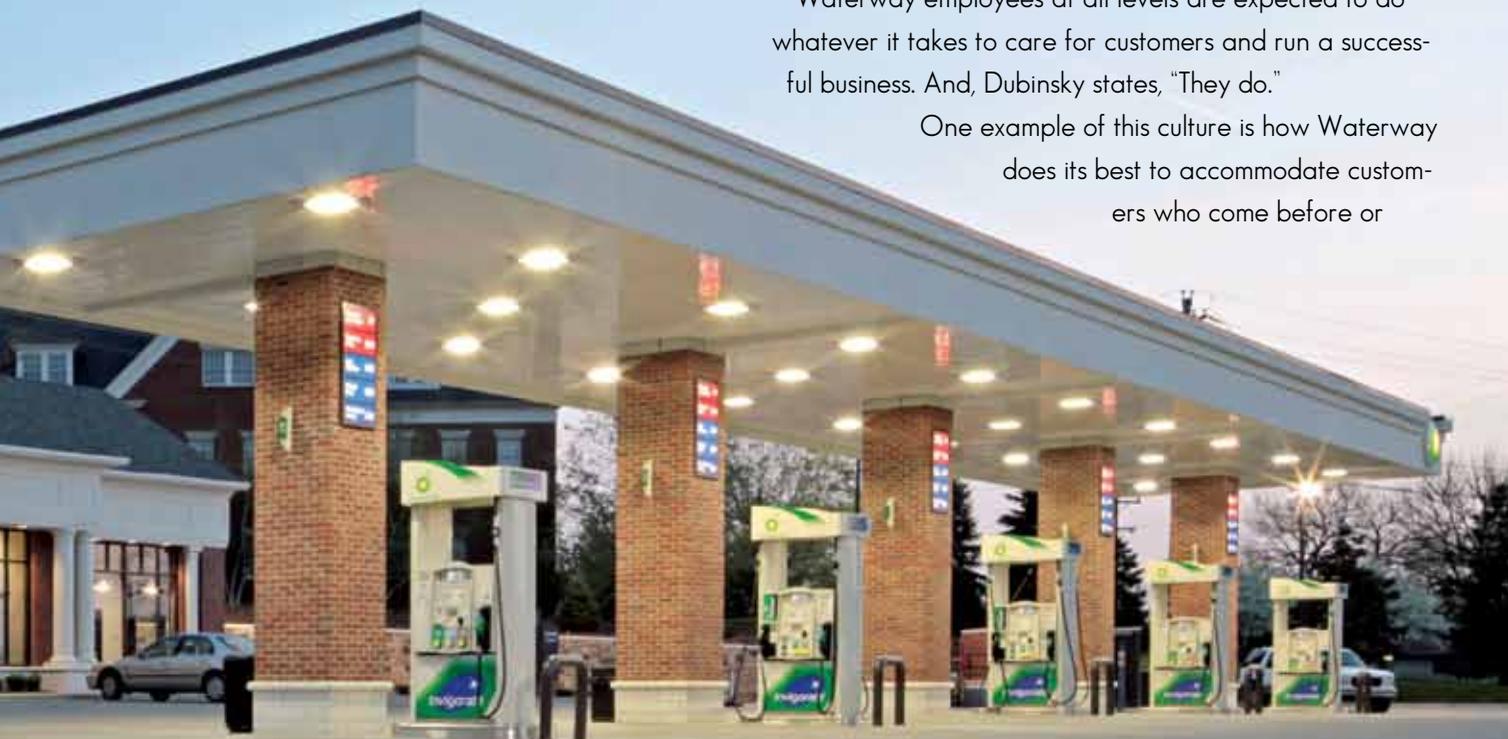


The company sustains its culture in several ways. Its senior leadership has several hundred years of carwash experience combined among its members. Waterway places value on its hourly employees as well.

"I doubt any carwash company puts more effort into the recruiting, selection and development of hourly associates and store managers," notes Dubinsky. "Our culture is unusually customer-focused and entrepreneurial."

Waterway employees at all levels are expected to do whatever it takes to care for customers and run a successful business. And, Dubinsky states, "They do."

One example of this culture is how Waterway does its best to accommodate customers who come before or



•• stories from the trenches

after the store's official operating hours. Dubinsky says this is the norm for the company.

Waterway encourages an environment where workers improve themselves personally and professionally. Continuous improvement is essential.

"We also expect our team members to do whatever it takes to get better, further their own careers and achieve their longterm personal goals," reports Dubinsky. "This ethic of caring about the customer, oneself and one's peers is at the heart of Waterway."

The company is also proud of its geographic footprint, the communities in which it operates and the construction of its facilities. The company will have a presence in five cities when its Chicago location opens later this year.

"Also, we are in great, stable communities, and our facilities are high-end and built to last with expected lives of 50 years," explains Dubinsky.

Making it personal

Waterway values its customers' opinions. During a normal visit to a location, a customer will talk to at least four different team members. This approach allows the company access to patrons at various points in their experiences.

"Our approach is very relationship oriented," he notes. "We get to know our customers. They get to know us. So, we know when our customers are happy, when they are unhappy and when they want us to change something we do."

The company maintains relationships with its customers by staying involved in the community. Since the beginning of its carwash donation program, Waterway has donated several million dollars' worth of carwashes to hundreds of nonprofits.

Waterway also makes cash donations to local organizations. According to Dubinsky, the company especially focuses on schools and charities supporting young people, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Junior Achievement. Team members serve as volunteers



and leaders for many of these groups.

In addition, Waterway recently has begun a fundraising program similar to others in the industry, adds Dubinsky.

For Waterway, all of these efforts make good business sense. By focusing outwardly, the company has been able to build a thriving organization.

Another of the company's concentrations is its utility consumption. "We have taken steps to reduce the amount of water, electricity and natural gas used by our stores," Dubinsky says. Reclaim systems have been installed in Waterway's newest stores, and the company plans to install a system to allow remote monitoring and control of utilities at its next new location.

Loyalty is the foundation

Waterway has had its share of success with its Clean Car Club program since the 1970s, shares Dubinsky.

The price has increased from its original rate of \$29.99 per year to its current \$350 per year cost, but many members have been with the loyalty program for more than 20 years.

Members receive free washes, gasoline and convenience store discounts. Most pay yearly rather than monthly. "Our ongoing members who pay once per year renew at a rate close to 90 percent," Dubinsky explains.

Waterway has also found success in its longtime attentiveness to its customers. While money certainly keeps the business afloat, the company believes its focus on people will keep it around for another 50 years and then some. □

*Photos in this article:
Waterway Gas & Wash*