

Waxie: 7 Decades of Sanitary Solutions

By Graeme Golucki

For a company that has grown to service the Western half of the United States, Waxie Sanitary Supply had a rather humble beginning. Harry Wax had served in the U.S. Navy during World War II as a member of the Seabees, the Naval Construction Forces. Upon his discharge in 1945, his wife convinced him to settle down in San Diego, CA. But Harry needed a way to put food on his family's table. A relative clued him in to a small business for sale, which he ended up purchasing. The business, at the time known as San Diego Janitor Supply, later became Waxie Sanitary Supply.

"My uncle knew he could not do it alone, so he got in touch with his brother, my father, Morris," says current Waxie Chairman and CEO Charles Wax. "Dad at the time was also serving in the military. During World War II, he served under General George S. Patton in Europe and was part of the forces that liberated the concentration camp in Dachau, Germany. Uncle Harry must have written dad one convincing letter because by early 1946, he had joined him in San Diego."

Brothers Build Business

The Wax brothers started out small with a one-room storefront office and a handful of employees. Due to shortages following World War II, paper products, such as tissues and towels, were hard to come by so the company focused on distributing other basic janitorial supplies—brooms, mops, floor wax, and cleaners—throughout the San Diego area. The Wax brothers developed a steady client base by focusing on their customers' needs, a philosophy Waxie still adheres to today.

"Being family owned, the two founding

brothers were very active owners, much like Charles and his brother David are now," says Waxie President and Chief Operating Officer Jeff Roberts. "This was not a hobby for the founders. And that passion at the top travelled down to each employee."

That drive paid off quickly for the Wax brothers, and by 1948, they expanded their storefront in downtown San Diego.



Waxie Chairman and CEO Charles Wax

While the Wax brothers' passion for the business helped spur the company's growth, the two also realized that a business is only as strong as its people. "Our company created a vision many years ago to measure the success of our business by the success of our people," says Wax. "From the beginning, we've looked for people with the right attitude when we bring them in and who are able to take on more responsibility and leadership."

In 1954, San Diego Janitor Supply was officially incorporated as Waxie Sanitary Supply, and the Wax brothers added to the new name with a distinctive logo and trademark. After the name change, Waxie continued to expand in Southern California, acquiring the Kleen-Line Corp. with warehouses in Santa Ana, CA, and San Bernardino, CA, in 1962.

Learning the Family Trade

It was around this time that Wax started his own career within the family business. "My dad first brought me down to work in the business when I was 12 years old," says Wax. "He had me in the warehouse loading trucks, sweeping the floor, labeling products. Then, as I got older, I worked in customer service, purchasing, and marketing. I've worn many hats growing up in the company."

In 1971, as Wax was continuing to work his way through the company's ranks, Harry retired, turning the company over to his younger brother Morris. Under Morris' leadership, the company moved to the next level, constructing new state-of-the-art distribution facilities in San Diego, Santa Ana, and San Bernardino, CA. In 1984, Waxie ventured across state lines, opening a facility in Salt Lake City, UT.

By 1986, with more than two decades of diverse experience with the company, Morris' son saw an opportunity for growth in Arizona and opened another Waxie branch in Phoenix, AZ. That same year, he was named company president. Waxie's distribution network continued to flourish, with the company further expanding into the Tucson, AZ, and Las Vegas, NV, markets.

Partners in Productivity

Today, Waxie blankets the Western United States, operating in 20 inventory centers in nine states. The company's distribution network now employs more than 800 workers and stretches from Arizona to Alaska.

One constant in Waxie's success has been the company's membership in ISSA. The first year the company was in business, the Wax brothers signed up with the association, and the decision has paid dividends ever since.

Member Milestones

"We've been a member of ISSA since the beginning," says Wax. "Our company has always gone to the annual trade show, and we've received nothing but good value for our experiences there. But it is not just the show. Over the years, there have been different circumstances that arise where ISSA has come in handy, such as keeping us abreast of government rules and regulations.

This goes back as early as the 1970s, when ISSA helped us become compliant with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's labeling regulations."

Waxie Marketing Vice President Rick Hazard concurs with his chairman about the value of ISSA. "Even today, with GHS compliance requirements, ISSA has been a huge resource for Waxie and the cleaning industry as a whole," he says. "We rely on ISSA to keep its ear to the ground and keep us abreast of the latest trends with the association's training and education programs."

Waxie also is very active in the independent distributors group Network Services. The company first joined in 1994 and has been earned Network Services Member of the Year honors for multiple years.

Training for Success

Training has been another factor in Waxie's decades of profitability. "As a company, we place a premium on developing our employees," says Roberts. "Not only do we train all of our own internal people on the products and equipment we sell, but we also train many of our customers. Lots of companies

talk about training, but we live it here at Waxie. Even when business wasn't doing as well, we continued to invest in education as it always has been important not just to our people, but to our clients as well."

That training and education helps Waxie separate itself from the competition. "There's a quote we use," says Hazard. "We are a value-added company. We don't just deliver the

box, we know what's in it, what it does, and how to use it.' When



Waxie's first storefront



Waxie's current headquarters

we compete with new companies, they might know logistics, but do they provide value like traditional companies like ours? No."

CIMS & Taking the LEED

Waxie also has been an early adopter when it comes to emerging industry trends such as facility design and sustainability. The company's distribution facilities in Mesa, AZ, and Salt Lake City have achieved the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

"I'm proud to say that our company was one of the first in the industry to invest in our own buildings constructed to jansan distribution specification, such as reinforced flooring to support narrow aisle technology," says Wax. "Since 1976, we've always

built our own buildings with our own training centers. And as the industry has focused on being environmentally friendly, we've taken the lead on that as well. We don't just sell sustainability, it is not just a buzz word to Waxie—it is a foundation we use to grow our business. Our company practices and enforces sustainability by having numerous ISSA Cleaning Industry Management Standard (CIMS)-certified employees and LEED-accredited professionals. We're always looking into alternative fuel sources for our buildings and fleet, such as natural gas and solar energy."

Waxie's success has not gone unnoticed outside of the jansan industry. In 2013, the Mesa Chamber of Commerce chose the company's facility in Mesa as the location for a town hall meeting on a variety of business topics. The town hall meeting was hosted by U.S. Senators Jeff Flake and John McCain. And earlier this year, the company celebrated its 70th anniversary with a two-day event in San Diego. In recognition of the company's contributions to the area, San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer officially proclaimed February 26 Waxie Sanitary Supply Day.

Waxie has come a long way from when the Wax brothers opened up a small storefront in the 1940s. By adhering to the company's commitment to both its people and its clients, that success should continue for decades to come. ■



Graeme Golucki is ISSA Web content coordinator. He can be reached at graeme@issa.com; phone, 800-225-4772 (North America) or 847-982-0800.